

Settling Libya: Italian Colonization, International Competition, and British Policy in
North Africa

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This thesis titled
Settling Libya: Italian Colonization, International Competition, and British Policy in
North Africa

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis analyzes the evolution of Libya from an Italian colony in the early twentieth century through the United Nations resolution of statehood in 1949. At the beginning of the twentieth century, what is now the nation of Libya was comprised of three distinct provinces (Cyrenaica, Tripolitania, and Fezzan). Whether commercial or strategic, none held much attraction to external powers. Divided by geographical, political, and cultural boundaries, the three provinces remained largely ignored. All of that changed, however, by the end of World War II. The importance of the region was progressively amplified through three phases: Italian colonization, World War II, and the years between 1945 and 1949. World War II represented the most critical of these, generating substantial competition among great regional powers over the future of Libya. Serving as a catalyst, the war increased the value of the region to levels that made determining the future of the region unsolvable for an individual nation. As a result, Libya became an international question ultimately settled by fusing the provinces into a single state that presumably shared a single identity.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	3
Acknowledgments.....	4
List of Maps	6
Introduction.....	7
Chapter 1: Settling Libya: The Italian Colony.....	12
Chapter 2: The Scramble for Libya	42
Chapter 3: Settling Libya: Postwar Resolutions and the United Nations	72
Conclusion	98
Maps.....	100
References.....	102

LIST OF MAPS

	Page
Map 1: Libya and the Conflicting Global Pull.....	100
Map 2: Inland Oasis' Granted to Sidi Idris.....	100
Map 3: British War Office Map detailing Boundary of Cyrenaica and Egypt	101
Map 4: British War Office Map detailing Boundary of Fezzan and French Africa	101

INTRODUCTION

How does a land, such as Libya, that is ninety-five percent arid and infertile, become valuable? Many minds immediately gravitate towards the contemporary and palpable theme of oil production. Taking into account that by 1965 Libya was the world's sixth-largest exporter of crude and considering " ... Libyan production could hardly have been better located [since] it was not in the Middle East nor did it require transit either through the Suez Canal or around the Horn of Africa, [and because] it was [just] a quick, secure jaunt across the Mediterranean ...,"¹ it is easy to understand the attraction. But what about the age before oil? What defined the era immediately preceding the creation of a formal nation-state called Libya, when the provinces of Cyrenaica, Tripolitania, and Fezzan were only loosely connected? During the nineteenth century the territory was an ignored part of the Ottoman Empire, but all of that quickly changed in the twentieth century. These provinces, collectively and individually, became incredibly appealing to the Italians before World War II, a variety of powers who took notice during the conflict, and afterwards interest intensified to include even more nations. Why? Without the magnetism of oil, what made this place important to so many nations during World War II? As Italian efforts to settle Libya through colonization were eliminated by the war, many nations expressed interest in acquiring the territory. Unlike the Italians, however, these external forces were not interested in settling Libya as a colony. Instead, they saw the region as a spoil of war. Suddenly, Libya's future shifted from an Italian *settlement* to *settling* the custody of Libya by worldwide competition.²

¹ Yergin, *The Prize*, 529.

² Italics are my emphasis.

What did these emerging states intend to do with the region, but more importantly, what measures were they willing to take in order to keep or win her? In essence, how does a regions value change based on geopolitics, doctrine, and war? Libya's Middle East destiny was driven by more than heredity. It was equally determined by global changes in imperialist ambitions and international relations.

Before World War II, the region was under the control of the Italians, and their intentions were fairly straightforward. Libya was, on the one hand, “... a fruitful colony and a population outlet ... Italy's legal-historical right—as a successor to the Roman Empire—[a statement of] Italy's aspirations as a great power ... [and the Second World] war was a test of national unity.”³ Yet, many of these objectives could have been accomplished anywhere. Why did the Italians choose this specific piece of real estate? The answer rests in geography. Not only was the location perfect for the quick export of an expanding Italian population, a symbol of historical significance, and a way to gain international power, but it was also strategically charged. Through its annexation, Italy would gain control of the heart of the Mediterranean, a land route to the African interior, and a superior way to infiltrate the Middle East. On paper the location was perfect in almost every way. Although they encountered obstacles before the war, settlement was on the rise and the government had every reason to believe it would continue. But Italian efforts to settle the fairy-tale Fourth Shore⁴ were ultimately unsuccessful, strategically they failed to exploit their assets, and World War II ensured that any lingering aspirations

³ Segre, *Fourth Shore*, 21.

⁴ Term introduced by the poet, Gabriele d'Annunzio.

were washed away. The war charted a new path for Libya, one that was initially paved by the British.

One of the most important factors in determining the fate of Libya was the Second World War, but not for the reasons one might assume. Was it simply a matter of “thousands of tanks [rolling] back and forth over the gravelly rock of Libya,”⁵ that determined where Libya belonged in the international landscape, or was there more to the story? Complex negotiations over the postwar fate of Libya were conducted by the British early in the war, even prior to the conclusion of the desert campaigns, and as a result a plethora of outcomes were proposed. In addition to the massive interest shown by an array of nations in annexing the region, three dominant links became clear during these deliberations: the Middle East, Europe, and Africa.

Documentation from the era provides ties to all of these connections. One of the more revealing dialogues was Egypt’s interest in possessing all or some of Cyrenaica, the Libyan province that neighbored their western border. Although this proposal never came to fruition, it was significant because it highlighted the strength of the Middle East relationship and how that bond could not be broken; a beacon of how interconnected the region was with its Arab east. One important aspect of deliberations was whether to combine the provinces, Cyrenaica, Tripolitania, and Fezzan into one entity or divide them into three separate spheres. As the most ingrained nation in the region, Britain played a dominant role in considering these options, and the preference that emerged was to partition the provinces. The geography of the terrain strongly supported this alternative because “... as a desert country without rivers, the topography discouraged

⁵ Yergin, *The Prize*, 527.

communication among the three regions.”⁶ As a result, the provinces were very diverse with “ ... distinct regional characteristics, including unique urban markets and local political organizations.”⁷ As such, each province was drawn outward in conflicting directions: Cyrenaica to the Middle East, Tripolitania toward Europe and the west, and Fezzan southward to the French African interior.⁸ These bonds provided a strong case for division. Conversely, if the three provinces fate were determined collectively, it became clear early on that the strongest province, Cyrenaica, would decide the future for them all. Accordingly, a single entity equaled a region with dominant ties eastward rather than westward.

But this does not explain why World War II played such an important role in Libya’s history. Simply put, the war highlighted the value of Libya. While it also eliminated the Italian colonization effort, Europe’s most direct effort to absorb the region, it did not stop international interest, especially the curiosity of Great Britain for Cyrenaica, from growing. As the possibilities of Libya came to light, national planning and posturing saturated individual national landscapes. This type of dialogue thrived, and even mushroomed, over the course of the war.

The postwar years were defined by rapid sessions of negotiations and paperwork. Now that the war was over, reality should have taken hold. For many nations, especially Great Britain, that was not immediately the case. The next several years were spent continuing the preparations and planning that had begun during World War II. The dream of utilizing Libya for imperialist goals, especially by Great Britain, would not die.

⁶ Ahmida, *Forgotten Voices*, 2.

⁷ Ibid., 3.

⁸ See Map 1.

The determination to maintain Libya's status as a valuable piece of property, therefore, continued.

But Libya's future was not determined by the British alone. Global developments emerged that made the settlement of Libya an international question. As such, the territory attracted even more interest in acquiring it. This retarded the negotiation process severely. Libya's status remained in a state of flux, unresolved, until 1949, when in a sudden thrust the United Nations voted for a single independent country.

Ultimately, however, Libya's future was shaped more by the long journey it experienced under imperialism, from the Italian invasion in 1911 until its fate was written in 1949, than it was by the proclamation of independence itself. It was during this time that it transformed from ignored provinces into an international commodity. The apex of this journey was World War II, and the escalation of interest that developed over these formative years, together with changes in global politics, redirected the region's future. As such, settling the fate of Libya could never be resolved internally or by just one external power. Libya's future was therefore settled in the only way left—internationally.

CHAPTER 1: SETTLING LIBYA: THE ITALIAN COLONY

Evidence suggests the Italians coveted the Libyan frontier much earlier than their 1911 military invasion. Almost immediately after the unification of Italy, following five wars between 1849 and 1870⁹, the newly formed government realized that by imitating its European neighbor's colonization expansion, they might gild a path towards their own prosperity. Over the previous century, the successful conquest of territories by great powers, such as Britain, inspired them. Defined by the scramble for Africa, the late nineteenth century was a time of expansion. This was most evident at a congress in Berlin during 1884 to 1885 when it was decided " ... that any European nation could acquire a piece of Africa simply by occupying it and notifying the other powers."¹⁰ Nevertheless, the colonial capability for late nineteenth century Italy was limited. Most of the African territory in question had already been claimed by stronger European powers. Yet, " ... at the turn of the century, Libya was one of the last African territories not occupied by Europeans; and its proximity to Italy made it a primary objective of Italian colonial policy."¹¹ Its availability, combined with its geographical and historical significance, was influential in the Italian decision to invade in 1911. Soon, however, the Italians learned that coveting Libya and claiming it were two entirely different things. Securing, settling, and holding the region was problematic. Resistance to their efforts was constant and widespread, springing from external, as well as internal, sources of opposition.

⁹ Sullivan, "The Strategy of the Decisive Weight," 307.

¹⁰ Heyck, *The Peoples of the British Isles*, 91.

¹¹ Bruce St John, *Historical Dictionary of Libya*, 57.

Externally, their attempts at colonizing Libya were challenged by the Ottoman Empire's new administration, the Young Turks. The Young Turks felt morally obligated to defend the region, " ... and dispatched money, arms, and supplies to Libya through Egypt and Tunisia ... [even sending] an important group of Ottoman officers known as the Special Organization ... a pan-Islamic secret intelligence unit ... to bolster Libyan [tribal] loyalty to pan-Islamic and Ottomanist ideologies."¹² On the surface, this external threat to Italy's plans was quickly neutralized by the Treaty of Lausanne signed in 1912, but it was vague. The Turks held on to Tripoli, and to further complicate matters, the natives still recognized the sultan as their "spiritual and political leader."¹³ After the formal withdrawal of the Ottomans, support for the natives continued to filter into Cyrenaica from throughout the Middle East. This assistance included Arabs, Circassians, Albanians, and Kurds from all across the Ottoman Empire.¹⁴ The region had both a spiritual and political connection to the Middle East that had to be broken if the Italians wanted to succeed in conquering the land.

Another document, the 1915 Pact of London which formally promised Italy control of Libya, merely provided protection against incursion from the signatories who were European powers. Like Lausanne, the value of this agreement to Italy was sparse in regards to Libya. It did not protect the Italians from their greater problems: governing a three-part Libya and dealing with the attachment the territory, especially Cyrenaica, had long-established to the Middle East.

¹² Bruce St John, *Libya: From Colony to Independence*, 61-62.

¹³ Vandewalle, *A History of Modern Libya*, 26.

¹⁴ McGregor, *A Military History of Modern Egypt*, 207.

“Only in 1951, long after the Italians were defeated in World War II and Libya’s control had been turned over to a joint British-French administration, did the country’s geographic boundaries and political structure take form under the aegis of the United Nations.”¹⁵ Prior to the establishment of the United Kingdom of Libya, the land was composed of three distinct territorial regions: Cyrenaica, Tripolitania, and Fezzan. Separated by vast expanses of wasteland, each of these provinces was attached to very different parts of the larger world: Cyrenaica to the Middle East, Tripolitania to the Mediterranean, and Fezzan to the African interior. In addition to this geographical adhesion, the provinces were culturally and politically disposed more to those outside areas than to one another. Ties between them were often artificial. When the Italians arrived and began assessing the areas potential, they quickly realized the need to conquer those aspects of delineation that hindered their mission, encourage the facets that aided their cause, and dismiss the parts that provided no benefits whatsoever.

Cyrenaica was the most challenging section of Libya for the Italians to control. Of the three provinces, its tribes were the best organized politically, and therefore provided the most internal resistance. The key to Cyrenaica’s political strength was the Senussi order, a religious group that developed in the late nineteenth century and gained the support of local tribesmen. The movement was both political and religious. “It organized trade, led prayers, and solved disputes,” and it even challenged the control of the Ottomans with “... Senussi followers voluntarily giving the Muslim *usher*, *tithe*, to

¹⁵ Kamrava, *The Modern Middle East*, 98.

the Senussi shaykhs while refusing to pay taxes to the Ottoman state.”¹⁶ The blending of religion and politics in the Senussi faction made it an intensely strong organization; one that had deep Islamic and Middle East roots. Going all the way back to the time of the prophet, “Muhammad was, unlike Jesus and Abraham, creating a state as well as a religious belief system.”¹⁷

Libyan resistance to Italian occupation was immediate, and grew exponentially after World War I and throughout the 1920s. This was partially a reaction to amplified measures put forth by the Italians, who with the ascent of Fascism in Italy put new fervor into their colonization movement. Prior to this development, the amount of effort exerted by the Italian administration in taming the region was minimal. Before Fascism, the Italian government was inherently weak and unstable. Participation in World War I left them equally diverted.¹⁸ With resources stretched thin and their focus on war, it is no surprise that the Italians were pliable in their negotiations concerning Libya. Utilizing Great Britain as an intermediary, Senussi leader Sayyid Idris al-Senussi, approached the Italians and the Akrama Agreement of 1917 was signed with, “... the Italians temporarily acquiesced to British patronage of the Sanusiyya and to the relative autonomy of the Senussi Order in Cyrenaica ... effectively putting all of Cyrenaica, except for the coastal strip, under Senussi control.”¹⁹ And further negotiations in 1920

¹⁶ Ahmida, *The Making of Modern Libya*, 103. A *tithe* is a voluntary donation, usually a portion of one's income.

¹⁷ Catherwood, *The Middle East*, 73.

¹⁸ World War I reestablished Italy to great power status, but at an extremely high cost—estimates are 680,000 lives and 26.5 billion lire. The war was an important turning point, reinvigorating the Italian expansionist goals, but it was equally burdensome. The Italians found themselves diplomatically at odds with Britain, France, and the United States, who all “opposed the creation of another world power.” For more on this topic, see Sullivan “Strategy of the Decisive Weight,” 343.

¹⁹ Vandewalle, *A History of Modern Libya*, 27.

and 1921, Regima and Bu Mariam, were signed to bolster the appeasement of Sidi Idris who was “ ... granted by the Italian government certain titles and privileges, including the title of Emire, the governorship of the oases of Jarabub, Aujila, Jalo and Kufra, and the right to maintain for a time certain mixed camps of armed Sennussiya and colonial troops.”²⁰ Since the Italians were primarily interested in the fertile coastline, granting these inland concessions was seen as a practical way to address the native problem. Ultimately, however, these attempts were only successful in temporarily weakening hostilities within the region. They did nothing to stop them, nor did they do anything to further Italian colonial ambitions.

In spite of these diplomatic efforts, misunderstandings with Sidi Idris dissolved the accords and relations between the two sides deteriorated quickly. This led to the Italians commencing a series of military operations that finally found Sidi Idris fleeing to Egypt.²¹ This rift was intensified by the 1923 instillation of a Fascist administration in Italy that led to a more aggressive Libyan policy. The Mussolini government still wanted to use Libya as a way to achieve international prestige, expansionist objectives, increased economic growth, restoration of the Roman Empire, and as a population outlet for its surplus population. These goals were not dissimilar from the ones launched at the end of the nineteenth century. What changed was how the government was prepared to achieve them—through brutal force. “The Fascist government pushed the colonial plan ... to full scale, declaring that Libya was essential for settling Italian peasants and thus that there was no room for compromise on this point; only force would succeed in clearing the land

²⁰ Consul Hurst to Mr. Austen Chamberlain, 10 February 1925, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs* Vol 30, Doc 1 J540/158/66, p. 1. See Map 2.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

for settlement.”²² John Wright, a former chief political commentator and analyst of the BBC Arabic Service specializing in Libya, quotes Libya’s Governor, Marshal Pietro Badoglio, to illustrate the mindset: “Penetrating the soul of this people is very difficult ... but now the way forward has been made clear, and we have to follow it to the end, even if the entire population of Cyrenaica has to perish.”²³

The 1920s were an explosive period for Cyrenaica characterized by violence, especially on the part of the Italians. To crush resistance:

Italian military leaders used tactics unmatched in brutality at any other time during the colonial wars in Africa, such as sealing wells, confiscating herds, closing Libya’s border with Egypt, dropping rebels from airplanes, and finally forcing 85,000 tribesmen and their families to leave their homes, consigning them to horrifying concentration camps in the desert of Syrtica ... [by] 1933 there were only 35,000 survivors in these camps.²⁴

To highlight the horror and put the devastation in perspective, estimates indicate that deaths from non-natural causes from 1912 to 1943 were between 250,000 and 300,000 in an estimated population of 800,000 to 1 million.²⁵ Evidence also suggests that during the 1920s the *Regia Aeronautica* (which by this point had assembled some air bases in Libya) began experimenting with gas and began using it against the Senussi.²⁶

²² Ahmida, *The Making of Modern Libya*, 105.

²³ Wright, *Emergence of Libya*, 286.

²⁴ Ahmida, *The Making of Modern Libya*, 107.

²⁵ Vandewalle, *A History of Modern Libya*, 31.

²⁶ Morewood, *British Defence of Egypt*, 31. Douhet was an Italian air theorist who believed that wars could be won by airpower alone.

The Italians believed that force was the only avenue available if they wanted to dominate Cyrenaica. Past diplomatic efforts had clearly failed. As the largest and most resistant of the three provinces, Cyrenaica was not only a hotbed of organized antagonism, but the only region that stood a chance of fending off Italian aggression. The Italians knew it was vitally important to gain control of the area, not only to eliminate the physical resistance within Cyrenaica, but to conquer Libya mentally. Two key obstacles stood in their way. Cyrenaica was first blessed with a well-organized resistance under strong leadership, but even more distressing was its geographical proximity to Egypt.

The most challenging revolts during the 1920s and early 1930s were led by Umar al Mukhtar, a powerful Cyrenaican sheikh, appointed as the Senussi military commander before the departure of Sidi Idris. Although he was very important to the movement, he was also an influential figure in his own right. Utilizing his knowledge of the terrain and guerilla tactics, he led, “... raids, ambushes, and sabotage best suited to their temperament and the countryside.”²⁷ His methods proved effective since the Italians were not able to thoroughly penetrate Cyrenaica, at least beyond the coastline, until he was brought to heel and publically executed in 1932. British Consul Cowan described the situation in a secret letter dated that March:

The final stroke in the settlement of Cyrenaica was actually delivered last autumn in the masterly little operation by which [Italian] General Graziani effected the capture of the rebel Umar Mukhtar with the greater part of his force in the mountains near the coast ... there may still be a few armed individuals who would

²⁷ Bruce St John, *Libya: From Colony to Independence*, 71.

like to cause trouble, but they are not strong enough to do any serious damage, and it is quite evident that the Italian authorities do not expect even minor incidents.²⁸

Even more problematic for the Italians, and running parallel to Mukhtar's assaults, was the close-knit relationship between Cyrenaica and Egypt. While there is documentation that shows the existence of disputes between Egypt and Cyrenaica, their proximity coupled with shared cultural and religious traits formed a bond between them. During the 1920s, many Egyptians empathized with Cyrenaica's struggle against the Italians. The Egyptians themselves were living under the external domination of their own imperialist, Great Britain. Even those Egyptians who tolerated the British presence in their country were moved by the plight of Cyrenaica as " ... surviving rebels [of the earlier uprisings] sought refuge in Egypt, spreading stories of Italian atrocities that influence native preference to preference for British domination as the lesser evil."²⁹ Therefore, it is not surprising that Egyptians regularly smuggled supplies into Cyrenaica for the resistance movement. In 1925, British Consul Hurst, described a conversation with Italian General Mombelli where the latter expresses concern that a formal boundary between Egypt and Cyrenaica had never been established. In his opinion, " ... so long as the Egyptian frontier remained undefined it was a difficult task... [stopping] the contraband traffic from Egypt, which enabled the rebels to prolong the resistance ... were

²⁸ Consul Cowan to Sir John Simon, 18 March 1932, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs* Vol 30, Doc 73 J927/24/66, p. 174.

²⁹ Morewood, *British Defence of Egypt*, 34.

this source of munitions closed to them, the rebel movement would be at an end.”³⁰ The vague boundary line allowed rebels to attack when it suited them, and then retreat safely back into the ambiguously owned desert, a place the Italians during the 1920s and early 1930s were often reluctant to follow in fear of antagonizing the British.

The Italians quickly decided to tackle the periphery issue directly, and in December of 1925 they reached an agreement with the British establishing Italian sovereignty over Jarabub and Kufra. This was a decisive geopolitical triumph for the Italians but a major setback for the Cyrenaica rebels. It, “... immensely complicated the efforts of the tribal guerrillas, as the Italians in the wake of the agreement, constructed a 186-mile (300 km) barbed wire fence along the border, patrolled by aircraft and armored cars, making it increasingly difficult for guerillas to slip back and forth into British controlled territory between battles.”³¹

The establishment of a fence between Cyrenaica and Egypt was more than a method of identifying where Italian Libya began and the British claim ended.³² It was also more than a way to weaken guerrilla opposition and the aid of supplies they received from Egypt. This delineation was an attempt by the Italians to distance the territory from its Egyptian, Arab, and Middle East roots. The biggest threat to Italian sovereignty was not the skirmishes discussed thus far, but the strong ties the region had to its eastern neighbors.

³⁰ Consul Hurst to Mr. Austen Chamberlain, 10 February 1925, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs* Vol 30, Doc 1 J540/158/66, p. 1.

³¹ Vandewalle, *A History of Modern Libya*, 30.

³² See Map 3. Portion of War Office Map dated 1930 from Overleaf in Cabinet Paper by Secretary of State of Foreign Affairs John Simons, 16 Jan 1934, CAB/24/247.

The extent of the bond between Cyrenaica and Egypt was not limited to merely the smuggling of supplies from Egypt: nor did this aid come only from peasants in the western Egyptian desert. Commitment was visible in all classes of Egyptian social strata, even apparent within the government. In an emotional speech in 1931 by Abd al Rahman Azzam, a highly influential member of the Wafd,³³ “ ... denounced recent Italian repression in Libya and proposed that the [Islamic] Congress pass a resolution calling for a Muslim boycott of Italy.”³⁴ In response, the Italian Consul in Palestine immediately protested Azzam’s statement at the Islamic Congress and this “ ... led the British authorities to deport Azzam.”³⁵ While his return to Egypt was greeted enthusiastically, little came of the matter. The European imperialists had stuck together and prevented any immediate threat to Italy’s formal hegemony in Libya.

Egyptian political support for Cyrenaica during the 1930s was complicated further by the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. While growing Islamic fundamentalism and nationalism diminished the border between Egypt and Cyrenaica, the steam of those movements was truncated mid-decade by Italian aggression in Abyssinia. Now, Egypt had to consider the consequences of having an Italian colony not only on their western border, but neighboring them on two fronts; west and south. With troops in both Ethiopia and Libya, the Italians were effectively boxing-in Egypt and Anglo-Egyptian Sudan on land. “With Italy entrenched in the west, and threatening to do the same in the south-

³³ The Wafd was the most influential Egyptian political party in Egypt during the 1930s and 1940s.

³⁴ Gershoni and Jankowski, *Redefining the Egyptian Nation*, 150.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 150.

east, Egypt [felt] the jaws of the pincers uncomfortably close.”³⁶ As a result, national security moved to the vanguard of Egyptian planning. With their own safety in question, the Egyptians were no longer in a position to directly aid Cyrenaica. Instead, their energies were embroiled in efforts to bond themselves more closely with their own imperial occupier, Great Britain, for defense. Although this was distasteful to the majority of Egyptians, their fear of Italian aggression was more immediate and therefore, “Feeling vulnerable to Italian aggression on their southern and western frontiers, they turned to Britain for protection, and proposed a treaty of preferential alliance be negotiated.”³⁷

Attempts had been made for many years to establish a treaty between Egypt and Great Britain with little success. Egyptian security concerns prior to these events were focused primarily around their western border, such as in 1924-25 when Cairo had resisted Italy’s successful attempts to redraw the boundary with Libya and Jarabub,³⁸ but concerns were now exacerbated by a geographical split; one that included trepidation over the security of the southern border of Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and Abyssinia. These misgivings infiltrated negotiations. The Egyptians wanted the treaty with the British to pass quickly, and became flexible in their terms.

The fact that many within Egypt were willing to approach the British and set aside their differences, at least in the short term, illustrates the level of angst that permeated the country. In December of 1935, the Egyptian government returned to the negotiation table

³⁶ Sir Miles Lampson to Sir Samuel Hoare, 12 July 1935, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs* Vol 17, Doc 52 J3059/1/1, p. 69-70.

³⁷ Kolinsky, *Britain’s War in the Middle East*, 17.

³⁸ Lawson, *Re-Envisioning Egypt*, 47. See Chapter Two for more information on *Jarabub*.

with a copy of a 1930 draft treaty, something both sides had summarily dismissed in the past. To their dismay, the British were not initially as receptive as they were for negotiations. Not having a formal agreement provided the British a certain amount of freedom that they were not necessarily willing to dismiss. Additionally, the British were tired of repeatedly going to the negotiation table and walking away empty handed. Fortunately for the Egyptians, the British representative and High Commissioner, Sir Miles Lampson, unlike so many others, was keen on reaching a settlement. In a memorandum, written in July of that year, he describes how Egyptian supporters of a treaty were trying to entice the British: “Certain sections of Egyptian public opinion argue that Italian penetration in Abyssinia spells Italian domination of the Nile Valley and the beginning of the end of the British Empire.”³⁹ While this propaganda alone did little to significantly pressure the British, Lampson’s assertiveness prompted, “... on Eden’s advice, the Cabinet [to] accept Lampson’s recommendation [to negotiate] ...”⁴⁰ Of course, this was not the sole factor in determining Britain’s surrender on the matter. Eden also records “The main importance to us of our position in Egypt derives from the necessity to protect our imperial communications through the Suez Canal ... the necessity was the chief reason for the decision to conclude the treaty with Egypt and to accept the terms to which the Egyptians were willing to agree.”⁴¹ Taking only five months, the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty, which had stalled for over a decade, came to pass. The accords

³⁹ Sir Miles Lampson to Sir Samuel Hoare, 12 July 1935, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs* Vol 17, Doc 52 J3059/1/1, p. 69-70.

⁴⁰ Lampson, *Diaries of Sir Miles Lampson*, Yapp ed., 25-26.

⁴¹ Mr. Anthony Eden Cabinet Memorandum, 19 November 1937, *British Documents on the End of Empire: Imperial Policy and Colonial Practice* Vol 1, Part 1, CAB 24/273, 124-125.

provided seventeen articles, many of which aided Egyptian security. Article Seven was particularly important because it stated:

Should notwithstanding the provisions of Article 6, either of the High Contract Parties become engaged in war, the other High Contracting Party will, subject always to the provisions of Article 10, immediately come to his aid in the capacity of an ally.⁴²

Even with the security assurance of the treaty, Egyptian support for Cyrenaica was still temporarily repressed due to an unforeseen shift in Egyptian politics. The Wafd, Egypt's most powerful political party, during the 1930s began aligning their agendas with British policy. Because British strategy was to protect Egypt and the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan only, the Wafd followed suit. This coupled with the growing popularity of Egyptian Nationalism, over Arab Nationalism, left little time for decision makers to concern themselves with a relatively isolated western province. Their objective in the west shifted, at least temporarily, from the incorporation of Cyrenaica in their planning, to fortifying a barrier that separated it. They often coordinated plans with the British, and sometimes they conducted maneuvers on their own accord. Anglo-Egyptian cooperation was evident at the border delineating Sudan from Libya where "to preclude the possibility of external encroachment on Sudan territory in the neighbourhood of the undelimited north-west frontier, the Sudan Defence Force were called on to occupy, in conjunction with the Royal Air Force, certain posts adjacent to the frontier."⁴³ There was the possibility that Mussolini might want to join Italian Libya and their territory in the

⁴² Lampson, *Diaries of Sir Miles Lampson*, Yapp ed ., 984.

⁴³ Report on the Administrative Conditions of the Sudan in 1934, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs* Vol 17, Doc 73 J6307/237/16, p. 121.

east. Linking up their colonial assets was a natural progression for the Italian Empire and their expansionist aspirations. Fascist Italy had big plans, and Egypt had no reason to believe the Italians intended to limit themselves to Libya's coast, nor their more remote colonies in the south-east. Linking the two regions of Libya and Italian East Africa on land, not only extended the Italian Empire, it also reduced Italian reliance on the Suez Canal.

Sometimes, Egypt's concern over her western border was handled exclusively by Egypt. Egypt drew her own line in the sand from Siwa Oasis in the Southern Sahara Desert to the Mediterranean coast at Marsa Matruh. In 1938, the Royal Egyptian Air Force, "... patrolled the Libyan frontier, often meeting with Italian Savoia Machetti trimotors doing the same thing on the other side of the barbed-wire fence that the Italians had erected from Jarabub to the coast."⁴⁴ Although Arab solidarity was a consideration for the Egyptians during this time, security over solidarity became paramount.

Egyptian apprehension to Italian annexation efforts, described above, was not unfounded. Mussolini's plan, "Converting the Mediterranean into an Italian lake (*mare nostrum*) and carving out a neo-Roman Empire at the expense of Western Powers lay at the heart of his foreign policy."⁴⁵ Mussolini was even heard saying "We must have Egypt; we shall only be great if we can get Egypt."⁴⁶ With Cyrenaica now firmly under Italian control through the suppression of the Mukhtar rebellions, and the distancing of Egyptian support for Cyrenaica in the middle of the decade, II Duce had every reason to believe Italian goals of extending the Italian Empire were within reach.

⁴⁴ Nordeen and Nicolle, *Phoenix over the Nile*, 35.

⁴⁵ Morewood, *British Defence of Egypt*, 25.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

The Italian occupation of the provinces of Libya entered another phase of evolution in the 1930s. Now that Cyrenaica was under Italian control, Italy was at liberty to intensify settlement efforts, starting with the importation of loyal Italian citizens. Immigration had until this point been minimal in all of the Libyan provinces, “the slow pace of colonization due in large part to the unstable military situation.”⁴⁷ Now that the Fascist government had exterminated most of the rebels, they had every reason to believe their settlements would thrive.

Mainland Italy had experienced an overpopulation problem for a very long time that developed “in relation to her economic resources” and because “her main emigration outlet in the New World had just been closed.”⁴⁸ This dilemma was exacerbated by Mussolini’s “battle for births,” a strategy to increase the Italian population, thereby increasing the Italian Empire.⁴⁹ The key to his plan was the migration of surplus citizenry to Italian colonies, especially Libya. If Italian settlement strategy was successful, they would dominate the region through immigration. Additionally, there were benefits of economic growth, expansion of empire, and a return for the nation to international prominence. In his autobiography, Mussolini describes the trials and tribulations of reestablishing Italy’s global position, something he addresses first, and then he expresses his concern for the overpopulated mainland by saying, “Into these labors to rebuild Italy’s peaceful position before the world, and to develop as duty

⁴⁷ Segre, *Fourth Shore*, 79.

⁴⁸ Cassels, *Fascist Italy*, 59.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

dictates every colonial possibility, which may help to solve our population problems, I have put my days and some of my sleepless nights.”⁵⁰

The Fascist plan to increase the number of Italians who lived on the fourth shore was a multi-faceted challenge. The first step was tackling the matter of immigration which involved the enticement of native Italians to cross the Mediterranean and settle there. In 1932 the Italian government sponsored the creation of the Libyan Colonization Board to address the matter. This group was responsible for creating ways for Italians to cross the Mediterranean and settle in the recently subjugated provinces. In a 1938 missive, Counsel Watkinson describes how the assembly “... for the past six years has been studying a scheme for the development of the colony known as *demographic colonization*, or the transplantation of self-supporting groups of peasants from the mainland.”⁵¹ Preparations for the arrival of immigrants under this proposal were extensive with very few details left to chance. According to Acting-Counsel Wakefield, “the new arrivals will find everything ready for them in their houses, which are fully furnished down to the lamp with oil in it ready for lighting ... large sums have been spent on water supply, building churches, clubs, town halls, houses ...”⁵² Further measures of preparation included the digging of artesian wells, establishment of reservoirs, the tunneling of irrigation canals, and installation of piping.⁵³ With preparations at this stage, all that was left to do was transplant members of the population. But, who do you

⁵⁰ Mussolini, *My Autobiography*, 260.

⁵¹ Acting Counsel Watkinson to Viscount Halifax, 31 October 1938, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs* Vol 30, Doc 156 J4157/3/66, p. 330.

⁵² Acting Counsel Wakefield Harrey to the Earl of Perth, 6 October 1938, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs* Vol 30, Doc 155 J4108/3/66, p. 329.

⁵³ Acting Counsel Watkinson to Viscount Halifax, 31 October 1938, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs* Vol 30, Doc 156 J4157/3/66, p. 331.

relocate, what methods do you use to accomplish the task, and how do you determine which province is best suited to accommodate them? Then, how do you ensure they succeed once they have reached their destination?

The statement earlier about enticing Italian citizens to Libya is bit deceiving. As early as 1911, the Italian government was bombarded with requests to travel to the Libyan coast. The early popularity was inspired by two simple factors. The first of these was the living conditions within Italy that could not support the nation's growing and overwhelming population. Identifying characteristics of social conditions included "...unemployment and strikes, cholera and malaria in the south, riot and near-insurrection over working conditions ..." to name a few.⁵⁴ The second reason for Libya's attractiveness was how the region was portrayed in both literature and the media. Appealing to citizens who were experiencing the characteristics described above, newspapers described the region as a "promised land" and "a little Eden" where farming would flourish and where the unskilled could prosper. In the province of Tripolitania where the locals enjoy a Mediterranean climate, there "... were estimated to be 2,000,000 date palms ..." and Gerhard Rohlfs, a German explorer stated "To me, the possession of Tunis is not worth one-tenth that of Tripoli."⁵⁵

This initial enthusiasm, however, began to wane quickly, especially in Cyrenaica. To start, the majority of immigrants were farmers, and the topography of Cyrenaica had too many obstacles for them to overcome. While the media praised the region with propaganda, much like they had done for Tripolitania, the territory only had a limited

⁵⁴ Wright, *The Emergence of Libya*, 224.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 222-225.

amount of cultivatable land. Adding to this problem, Cyrenaica had a dry and rainy season that was unpredictable, “... markedly seasonal, extremely irregular from year to year and locally variable in any given year.”⁵⁶ While the “soil [was] a rich red clay soil,” lack of water was a problem. There was also the competition with Tripolitania, who “owing to its earlier conquest ... [was] much more developed than Cyrenaica ... [and] in the past has been more of an arboricultural and fruit and vegetable producing region, while Cyrenaica produced cattle and grain, especially barley.”⁵⁷ The Tripolitania variety of farming suited the majority of potential colonists better than that of Cyrenaica, most of them being from Sicilia and Southern Italy. In addition, the Mediterranean and European culture of Tripoli more closely resembled their own. Although Cyrenaica was also located on the Mediterranean Sea, its customs were more closely related to Egypt and the Middle East. Italians had little in common with the native Bedouins of Cyrenaica, who as migratory people were use to “exploiting their natural environment, ...” raising cattle, goats, sheep, and camels in the rugged landscape.⁵⁸ Perhaps the most notable deterrent limiting Italian enthusiasm for this particular province was security factors. As described earlier, the region was overrun with rebellion until 1932, when the Italian military was finally able to gain control.

Although insurgency was not as prevalent in Tripolitania, and though the region was culturally more compatible with Mediterranean Europe, the province still had its share of unattractive features during the early years that limited settlement. For example,

⁵⁶ Behnke, *The Herders of Cyrenaica*, 11.

⁵⁷ Counsel Cowan to Sir John Simon, 18 March 1932, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs* Vol 30, Doc 73 J927/24/66, p. 175.

⁵⁸ Behnke, *The Herders of Cyrenaica*, 26.

total rainfall amounts were only 300 mm annually which influenced farming. That was even less than in Cyrenaica, where averages ranged between 500 to 600 mm.⁵⁹ And although the region of Tripolitania had the advantage of more underground water sources than Cyrenaica, these had not yet been tapped.⁶⁰ With ties dominantly Mediterranean, however, obstacles in trade and finance were much more significant in halting immigration. According to Consul Cowan, the province could not even pay its own way. In 1932, he told Sir John Simon that finances were so scarce, “in Tripoli even clothing is sold on the hire-purchase system.” In another example he exclaimed, “last summer great advertisement was made over the export of a cargo of wheat from Tripoli to Italy ... 300 tons ... but at the time it was being loaded there was a British ship in harbor unloading 3,000 tons [from Canada].”⁶¹

In the southern province of Fezzan, migration by Italians was almost non-existent. Often forgotten in scholarship, this landlocked area had little in common with either of its northern neighbors. While Cyrenaica and Tripolitania shared the Mediterranean, the Fezzan was an oasis in the desert and had more in common with the African nations to its south. Covering approximately 184,000 square miles, its basin-like terrain was surrounded by a sea of sand.⁶² The value of Fezzan for the Italians was minimal at best. Why would Italian immigrants want to settle in a region that was located in the middle of the desert, and which was dominantly a blend of African and Middle Eastern culture? In addition, the territory was not fully under the control of the Italians. Like Cyrenaica, it

⁵⁹ Ahmida, *Forgotten Voices*, 3.

⁶⁰ Majeed, “Libya: A Geopolitical Study,” 163.

⁶¹ Consul Cowan to Sir John Simon, 18 March 1932, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs* Vol 30, Doc 73 J927/24/66, p. 175.

⁶² Bruce St John, *Historical Dictionary of Libya*, 38.

had been plagued with native rebellions. Compounding this problem, “... by 1924 the region of Fezzan had become a refuge for most of the resisting Tripolitanian tribes ...” and it was not until “1930 when modern airplanes and poison gas finally overcame them” and these “tribes fled to Chad, Niger, Egypt, and Tunisia”⁶³ that the Italians were able to conquer the region. Once they had the area under control, however, they did not stay. Leaving only a military contingent behind, they kept their focus on the provinces that were key to their planning; Cyrenaica and Tripolitania. There were only limited advantages the Italians could see in Fezzan, such as a minor strategic value and its utilization as a trade route. While it held some economic promise with “two international Sahara trade routes pass[ing] through Fezzan—one through Tripoli Ghadamis-Ghat and the other through Tripoli-Sukana-Murzaq to Bilad al-Sudan,”⁶⁴ trade in the 1920s for the Sahara declined.⁶⁵ As far as its strategic importance, “it extend[ed] Libyan territories into the heart of Africa.”⁶⁶ In any event, Italy’s priority was the Libyan coast. It needed to exploit the abundance of resources within Cyrenaica and Tripolitania before it would even consider taming a remote and minimally beneficial Fezzan.

As described earlier, initial appeal in immigrating to Libya by Italy’s peasant population did not last very long. Even the citizens who showed interest in moving before the 1930s were often prohibited from doing so by lack of funds for transport or security problems within the colony itself. In 1932 the Mussolini government realized that although they had cleared the path for immigration, people were still not coming.

⁶³ Ahmida, *The Making of Modern Libya*, 106-107.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁶⁵ Ahmida, *Forgotten Voices*, 21.

⁶⁶ Majeed, “Libya: A Geopolitical Study,” 130. The border in the southwest was settled in 1919, much earlier than the boundary in the southeast by France and Italy.

That is when the Fascist government realized they needed to supply institutional provisions, such as the Libyan Colonization Board, and then a demographic colonization plan, if they wanted to overpower the region in this way.

It took several years for the board and the plan to build up steam. In early 1937 less than 300 families had settled in Libya using the Italian's demographic colonization plan, another 100 were implanted by an organization called the *Istituto Nazionale Fascista della Previdenza Sociale*, and a mere 300 through the Tobacco Syndicate.⁶⁷ All indicators suggested Italian immigration efforts were failing. But in 1938 expectations became somewhat optimistic with the announcement of Italo Balbo's⁶⁸ plan for a wave of mass migration. In a memo, the Earl of Perth explains "the scheme adopted for the demographic colonization of Libya ... the first 1,800 families are all to set sail for their new homes ... their departure ... has been widely heralded in the press as [the first of] the movement of the "Twenty Thousand" to Italy's Fourth Shore."⁶⁹ It was no mistake that the launch date of the ship bringing the immigrants to Libya coincided with the anniversary of the Fascist march on Rome. This was to highlight the expansion of the empire and the importance of the Fascist movement in its execution.⁷⁰

Italy quickly capitalized on the event publicizing that the 1,800 landless peasants came from all over Italy and were " ... carefully selected by a special commission from a much greater number of applicants."⁷¹ When they arrived in Libya, Balbo's

⁶⁷ Acting Consul Watkinson to Viscount Halifax, 31 October 1938, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs* Vol 30, Doc 156 J4157/3/66, p. 331.

⁶⁸ Italian Governor of Libya from 1934 till his death on 28 June 1940 from a reported aircraft crash.

⁶⁹ The Earl of Perth to Viscount Halifax, 28 October 1938, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs* Vol 30, Doc 154 J4063/3/66, p. 327.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

administration made certain measures were in place that would guarantee prosperity, but with 1,000 families going to Cyrenaica and 800 to Tripolitania, would isolationism be a problem in ensuring immigrants were content and flourishing? The Italian government quickly alleviated such concerns by giving each family a car upon arrival.⁷² In addition, “the *Litoranea Libica* linked the colony from the Tunisian frontier to the Egyptian border.”⁷³ This road not only allowed immigrants the opportunity to travel without constraint, but served as a way to expand settlements as “colonist villages grew up outside of Tripoli and the plateaus of Cyrenaica.”⁷⁴ Asserting their dominance in the region, “these villages [were] all given the name of some Italian patriot, Fascist martyr or colonial pioneer.”⁷⁵ It was the goal of Fascist Italy to infiltrate Libya in all aspects of life. In 1938 they made huge strides toward that goal.

Another important aspect of Italy’s plan to increase the Italian population within Libya was through procreation. Not only were people encouraged to come to Libya, but they were expected to have large families. In spite of the population problem at home, Mussolini believed that making the empire great was directly tied to increasing the number of Italians in the world. This was especially true in Libya. Acting-Consul Watkinson remarked, “Signor Mussolini has declared that an Empire cannot be held and protected unless the whole nation is completely populated.”⁷⁶ When describing Italian settlers within the colony, he remarked that there were many babies, children, and

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Segre, *The Fourth Shore*, 87. Roadway built to connect Cyrenaica and Tripolitania.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 87.

⁷⁵ Acting Consul Watkinson to Viscount Halifax, 31 October 1938, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs* Vol 30, Doc 156 J4157/3/66, p. 332.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

expectant mothers. The government took the mission even further when they imported 200 Fascist women to camps outside the city, training them in domestic Libyan life and giving them tours of the city. “It is intended that they shall carry the good news home and rouse enthusiasm, and it is expected of at least a portion of them, as good Fascists, to volunteer to return as future wives and settlers.”⁷⁷

Interestingly enough, the policy concerning the demographic integration of natives, was unique compared to other Italian colonies. Policy concerning mixed-marriages with local Arabs was lax compared to the strict rules of segregation in other Italian colonies. Italians were convinced they could win over the natives, so they also encouraged the enlargement of full-blooded Bedouin families. The Italian government believed that over time, these Libyans would realize the merits of Italian citizenship. Of course, these claims were not an attempt to improve the lives of the Bedouin. In reality, they were another way to populate the terrain with loyal citizens and reflected pure Italian self-interest. In 1933 after the rebellions were put down, “the first object of the government was now to increase the Bedouin population and not to destroy it, for the country could never be prosperous in its present depopulated state. At least 20,000 refugees had taken refuge during the war in Egypt and elsewhere and they could not be expected to return unless a more conciliatory policy was pursued.”⁷⁸ Measures, such as an “Arab colonization centre at El Atrum—25 kilom east of Apollonia, in Cyrenaica” were established, but “here Arabs are being trained to live in the same way as Italian

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Evans-Pritchard, “Italy and the Bedouin in Cyrenaica,” 13.

colonists.”⁷⁹ Yet in reality, the Bedouin were still often treated as second class citizens. For example, Graziani believed “not only must the Bedouin be kept off the fertile plateau but [they] must be stabilized in the country on the edge of the wilderness (*predesertico*) where, in his opinion, they had sufficient and suitable land for pasturing and sowing.”⁸⁰ It was often Italian policy to take the best coastal lands from Bedouin landowners, sometimes with compensation, other times without it. Regardless of Italian inconsistency, the Bedouin population in Libya increased during the prewar years. In 1935 alone, some 3,526 refugees returned from Egypt to Libya, with the majority returning to Cyrenaica.⁸¹ They did not, however, return because of Italian propaganda efforts. On the contrary, anti-Italian propaganda was much more prevalent. According to an Arab source, even the names of streets in the Arabic regions were changed to Italian names in Italy’s attempts at forced citizenship, with the ultimate goal of “destroy[ing] the Libyan race completely as an independent people.”⁸²

Another measure taken by Libya’s governor, Balbo, was the promotion of tourism and archeology, both with the goal of increasing economic prosperity, immigration, and ultimately the glory of Rome. Scholarship rightly credits Balbo with having the most successful era of colonization as “Tripoli became a handsome city with modern buildings ... archaeological expeditions unveiled the ancient glory of Leptis Magna and Sabratha, [with] Balbo turning the sites into tourist attractions ... [and] to promote tourism new

⁷⁹ Colonel MB Burrows Memorandum, 7 June 1939, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs* Vol 30, p. 350.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁸² Consul Watkinson to the Earl of Perth, 13 March 1939, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs* Vol 30, Doc 163 J1109/72/66, p. 344.

hotels were built throughout the colony.”⁸³ These measures were largely successful and created a plethora of jobs for immigrating Italians. Under the governor’s management, approximately 30,000 colonists came to Libya in 1938⁸⁴, a number that had not been reached before. In a speech by Balbo to welcome colonists, he said “the boundaries of Italy are being extended, the good seed of Rome is being transplanted in great profusion to this Fourth Shore!”⁸⁵ Italian strategy to dominate the terrain by populating it with Italian citizens was finally taking off.

But these successful events were hampered by a few problems. People began to realize that immigrants would have a hard time maintaining the lifestyle they were initially provided by the government and that a “white poor” problem might arise. Another problem was that many of the wells were “ ... so highly mineralized as to be undrinkable and even deleterious to crops ... [created events such as] a successful boring near Tripoli yielded water that was so sulphuretted that the well had to be plugged up again, the stench poisoning the whole neighbourhood.”⁸⁶ Additionally, the native population was still a problem and often clashed with the Italians. While locals were treated better than they had been during the 1920s, there was still severe inequality causing impetus for dissatisfaction.

While each province offered unique challenges, the Italians of the prewar era began efforts to encourage commonality, at least between Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. Of

⁸³ Segre, *The Fourth Shore*, 87.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁸⁵ Consul Watkinson to the Earl of Perth, 7 November 1938, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs* Vol 30, Doc 157 J4310/3/66, p. 336.

⁸⁶ Acting Consul Wakefield-Harrey to the Earl of Perth, 6 October 1938, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs* Vol 30, Doc 155 J4108/3/66, p. 329.

course, that position was relatively new. During the 1920s, the Fascist government wanted nothing more than to keep the two regions as separate as possible. This stemmed from the desire of Berbers and Arabs to play a role in separate tribal governance and who “hoped-for unification of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania under a single amire” to resolve infighting and disputes. This could pose a real threat to Italian hegemony. They “clearly understood that the unification of the two provinces would be disastrous for their interest.”⁸⁷ But by 1932 that particular threat was over, and policy changed to suit Italian goals. Finding ways to connect the two regions, which were separated geographically by the 300 mile Sirte Basin, became relevant in Italian planning.

One way the Italians strengthened the Tripoli-Cyrenaica connection was by merging the previously separate provincial Italian governments. The administrations were “consolidated in 1929 under a single governor with the capital in Tripoli...” and again in 1934 with the press’s “announcement of the [formal] unification of Libya, which hitherto has consisted of the two separate colonies of Tripoli and Cyrenaica ...”⁸⁸ Not surprisingly, Fezzan remained under the military’s supervision, an afterthought in Italian policy.

Strategy for unification of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania stretched further in 1938 and 1939 when the new Libya became integrated as a part of the Kingdom of Italy. To ensure the region was sufficiently under Italian control, achieve national objectives, and combat potential international opposition, the government decided to make the colony a

⁸⁷ Vandewalle, *A History of Modern Libya*, 29.

⁸⁸ Mr. Murray to Sir John Simon, 24 November 1934, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs* Vol 30, Doc 124 J2853/356/6, 281.

part of Italy itself. In 1938 the Fascist Grand Council proclaimed “the four provinces⁸⁹ of Libya shall become part of the national territory and decides that legislative measures shall be taken to define the new statute of the peoples of Libya...” and they wanted to “place it more and more on a footing with the rest of Italy.”⁹⁰ Bolstering their grasp on the territory, this measure also legalized attempts to claim resources within Libya that otherwise were considered borderline. For example, the Italians now felt they had the right to utilize native Libyans for military service.⁹¹ The utilization of the Libyan labor pool not only benefitted the empire, but it was also a way to further integrate the natives within it.

Before World War II, Italy’s primary interest was the expansion of their empire. Following the example of global empires, such as Britain and France, they decided the best way to expand was through colonization. Libya’s availability, proximity, and historical significance made it a prime target for these late bloomers, but introducing the provinces to imperialism was not as easy as they had imagined. Although they officially claimed the territory in 1911, they spent nearly 20 years just trying to conquer it. Their greatest challenge was the pull of the Middle East, especially in the most powerful province of Cyrenaica. During the 1930s, however, the Italians gained a window of opportunity that allowed them to initiate state programs and policy that supported their goals. Local rebellion was diminished in 1932, and support from the Arab world at large

⁸⁹ Segre, *The Fourth Shore*, 88. The four provinces of Tripoli, Misurata, Benghazi, and Derna were created in 1934 within Cyrenaica and Tripolitania. This strengthened the unity of the two main provinces in the north, but disregarded the interior Fezzan which remained under military control. The governor, Balbo never believed full integration of the interior would be possible.

⁹⁰ The Earl of Perth to Viscount Halifax, 26 October 1938, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs* Vol 30, Doc 153 J4037/3/66, p. 326.

⁹¹ Ibid.

was reduced mid-decade. With the stars aligned, Italy was finally in a position to gain dominance over Libya's three provinces.

The 1930s were inconsistent, but promising for Italian Libya. They spent a great deal of time conquering the region by creating loyal Italian citizens. For the most part, they were successful. From 1936 to 1940 the number of Italians in Libya more than doubled, going from sixty-four thousand to one hundred and ten thousand. The population in Libya was rising, and the government had every reason to believe this trend would continue. They had invested almost 30 years in Libya's development, and their efforts were finally beginning to pay off.

Their chief weapon in this endeavor was demographically filling Libya with Italy's surplus peasants. With a population crisis raging in mainland Italy, they argued that Libya was the solution. Their policies in this regard, however, proved contradictory. Overpopulation as a problem was never as important as expanding the empire; in reality it was a necessary part of the master plan. The only chance the Italians had at permanently conquering their biggest threat in Libya, Middle East opposition, was if their plan to dominate by flooding the region with Italians and integrating the natives was successful. Colonial growth began to make progress in 1938, through government assistance and the calculated effort of Libya's governor, Italo Balbo. While the burden of importing and maintaining immigrants, and bouts of discontent from native-immigrants hindered their expansionist efforts, these obstacles were the result of Italian inexperience and could be conquered over time. Unfortunately, this was something they did not have. The progress they made was just about to be stopped in the most annoying way—by war.

While some immigration continued during World War II, and repatriation was evident during and after the war, the Italian settlements were never the same. In Cyrenaica the colony was entirely destroyed, with the majority of Italians evacuated in 1942.⁹² It was only in the characteristically European, and somewhat safer settlements of Tripolitania, where a relatively sizeable number of Italians remained. At the end of the war, about fifty thousand Italians lingered. But even in this, the most promising province, the age of Italian settlement was over. “The physical signs of hard times and low morale ... long soup lines at noon in front of charity and welfare organizations in Tripoli; men and women begging in the streets; Italian children, dirty and barefoot, roaming the streets with Arab playmates; the marriages of forty-five Italian women who converted to Islam and ‘more or less legally’ married Libyans.”⁹³ These events were more than proof of Italy’s failure to conquer Libya by establishing Italian settlements, and because of the intrusion of war. Specifically, they illustrate the power of the territory’s Middle East connection. Even in the province with the closest ties to Europe, Tripolitania, the influence of the Middle East was seeping back into the void left from Italy’s defeat. Ironically, the Italian plan to overrun the landscape with Italian citizens, especially their plans to absorb the native population, evolved during the war into a native population, with Arab roots absorbing Italian colonists who were too poor or without the means to escape.

Driven by the desire to revive Italy’s position as a world power, Mussolini’s wartime efforts in regards to Libya shifted with the outbreak of World War II to focusing

⁹² Segre, *Fourth Shore*, 167.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 172.

on the regions strategic potential. But even in this regard they failed. In a matter of just a couple of years, all the progress made in Libya, and Italy's colonial dreams, were gone.

In the blink of an eye, everything, including Libya's future, changed.

CHAPTER 2: THE SCRAMBLE FOR LIBYA

How does a territory go from isolation to center stage, from a landscape that few nations notice to one that everybody wants? Such was the story of Libya during the first half of the twentieth century, most importantly during World War II. Throughout the 1800s the three provinces of Cyrenaica, Tripolitania, and Fezzan, which make up modern-day Libya, barely registered with European imperialists. Although these great powers were scrambling elsewhere in the African continent, they disregarded Libya's nearly 680,000 square miles of land as insignificant. As three scattered zones, divided by oceans of sand, Libya remained for the most part untouched and docile. The great powers, including Britain and France, concluded that the provinces were too much trouble to consider. This harsh and divided landscape did not fit into their immediate plans, especially when other less challenging and more rewarding areas were available in Africa and beyond. Libya remained in this state, off the European radar, until Italy came forward and claimed the land in its war with the Ottomans in 1911.

Even during Italy's thirty years of residency, from 1911 to the Second World War, other European nations generally left the Italians to their own devices concerning the terrain. Most resistance to Italian planning for Libya came in the form of internal native rebellions, especially in the province of Cyrenaica. When outside opposition did flare, it was commonly fueled by the rise of nationalist sentiment coming from Cyrenaica's closest neighbor, Egypt. Yet even this interference was limited to aiding Cyrenaica's insurgents or occasional political discourse. By the end of the 1930s, it appeared that Italy had finally achieved permanence within Libya. Demographic

colonization was populating the Libyan coast with loyal citizens, and the Italian government had strengthened their position through territorial improvements, such as drilling wells and building roads. But just as the Italians grew confident, war erupted, and their hold on Libya crumbled.

As World War II raged and Italy lost control of its empire, Libya's identity again came into question. While the basic structure of Libya remained static, the human element of geopolitics transformed international perception. Characteristics unseen before the conflict, were now highlighted by the battles that were fought in Libya's northern sea, on her shores, and in her interior. Great powers examined the three provinces of Cyrenaica, Tripolitania, and Fezzan with fresh eyes. As a result, some nations began to covet specific pieces of the Libyan pie, while others ravenously sought it whole. In either case, officials made calculated efforts to obtain this newfound treasure as a spoil of war. Now that the war had unlocked the merits of the terrain, the *scramble* was about to begin. But who was doing the *scrambling*? What exactly were they *scrambling* to secure? And how did this *scrambling* influence the future of the region?⁹⁴

Libya had a number of desirable features, but for some European powers, its position on the Mediterranean was especially attractive. As described in Chapter One, the Italians spent most of their efforts before the war colonizing the provinces of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica on Libya's north shore: trying to conquer the region, populating it, with the ultimately goal of expanding their empire. They focused little energy on the Libyan interior, leaving Fezzan undeveloped and under the military's supervision. But, if populating Libya was all the Italians were interested in doing, then

⁹⁴ Italics are my emphasis.

their colonization projects would never have dismissed the interior so easily. It was the expansion of the Italian Empire and how Libya's strategic location played into achieving that ambition which genuinely attracted the Italian government. Situated directly across the Mediterranean from Italy, the region's shoreline had once belonged to ancient Rome, and as such it was a historical motivator for Italy. Just as ancient Rome had cultivated and settled the African coast, so did the Italians of the twentieth century. But that was only part of the story. The decision of old and new Italy to specifically target Libya rested on its enduring strategic value, especially its connection to the sea. The Mediterranean waterway was the heart of the empire, and the ancients believed in its value so strongly that they were willing to fight for it. "In the third century BCE, Rome and Carthage entered into a competition for control of the central Mediterranean, a struggle ending with Rome's destruction of its rival at the close of the third Punic War ..."⁹⁵ Therefore, it was unremarkable that Fascist Italy entered World War II in 1940, and that the Mediterranean and Libya became important theaters of operation.

Scholarly views concerning Libya's strategic importance for Fascist Italy are clear. As Elizabeth Monroe wrote in 1938, Libya represents, "...a magnificent strategic position astride the centre of the sea ... troops stationed there can threaten Egypt or Tunisia, while ships and aeroplanes based on Tobruk command the 200-mile channel between Cyrenaica and Create."⁹⁶ Additionally, John Wright argues "Libya can no longer be counted out, as a sort of no-man's land of small significance; its resources are limited, but they are being exploited to the utmost, while its strategic value has become

⁹⁵ Bruce St John, *Libya: From Colony to Independence*, 13.

⁹⁶ Wright, *The Emergence of Libya*, 310. Quoting Elizabeth Monroe in *The Mediterranean in Politics*, 168.

very great.”⁹⁷ This was evident on land, in the air, and most importantly on the sea. Guiseppe Fioravanzo, an Italian naval theorist of the time, believed strategy in general was dictated by two factors; essential and operational. In his model, the key to any plan was to weaken the enemy’s resolve and “meet the enemy in conditions of relative advantage.”⁹⁸ To many Italian strategists, and a great many planners abroad, Italy’s control of the central portion of the Mediterranean, with land bases surrounding it, was just such an advantage. Fioravanzo also believed naval operations could exploit geography to its greatest potential by utilizing the sea for more than direct combat. The navy should expand “its role as ensuring that the nation had the means to resist by safeguarding its seaborne supply, preventing the enemy from getting overseas supplies, guaranteeing the inviolability of the naval frontier and maintaining links with the colonies.”⁹⁹ Italian dominance in the Central Mediterranean accomplished all of these objectives. It gave Italy a potential monopoly over all traffic going through the Mediterranean Sea and limited enemy transport in times of war by creating a divide which split the sea in half. Most importantly, it supplied an artery to Italy’s foremost colony, the fourth shore.

Mussolini’s interpretation of Libya’s worth and its connection to the Mediterranean are much more complicated than these analyses might suggest. While he espoused the nostalgia of returning Rome to her former glory, he was largely driven by how the area benefitted Italy strategically in the here and now. Strangely enough, he developed a love-hate relationship with region, especially the Mediterranean as a

⁹⁷ Ibid., 314.

⁹⁸ Gooch, *Mussolini and His Generals*, 233.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 233.

pathway to Libya. On the one hand, his judgment about the waterway, connecting Italy to Libya, was positive. He recognized the logic of the pre-fascist Italian government who, “... hope[d] to exercise some sort of strategic control over two sides of the Central Mediterranean triangle ... The base of this triangle pass[ing] through the ports of Tobruk, Benghazi, Tripoli, and Zuara.”¹⁰⁰ And, his strategy during World War II reflected this acceptance. In 1939 he ordered the occupation of Albania, followed by an invasion of Greece in 1940. Control of these regions were key “... to consolidate Italian strategic control of the third side of the Central Mediterranean triangle.”¹⁰¹

On the other hand, Mussolini often complained about the Mediterranean Sea. According to historian Simon Ball, he sometimes portrayed it as a barrier instead of describing it as a link to Libya and the wider world. Subsequently, Italy was captive to the sea and “the bars of this prison are Corsica, Tunisia, Malta, and Cyprus. The guards of this prison are Gibraltar and Suez.”¹⁰² Even though his control of the Mediterranean was shaky before the war, and even though it was completely removed early in the war, his vision during these rants was always to expand his empire even further. “The historical objectives of Italy have two names, he declared, Asia and Africa.”¹⁰³

Mussolini had a practical view of continental Libya, compared to the Mediterranean, and in relation to the Italian Empire. Regarding Libya as a colony, he believed it was just the beginning. “These two colonies alone cannot solve our population problem. Mark this well. But with good-will and with the help of the typical

¹⁰⁰ Wright, *The Emergence of Libya*, 216.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 217.

¹⁰² Ball, *The Bitter Sea*, 11.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 10.

colonizing qualities of Italians, we can give value to two regions which once were owned by Rome and which must grow to the greatness of their past and contribute to the new and greatly expanding possibilities of our general economic progress.”¹⁰⁴ As always, he believed Italy would continue to expand beyond the Libyan borders.

Because of this, at the beginning of the war, the Allies rightly worried that Mussolini might want to “link up the two halves of his African empire” by capturing Egypt, Palestine, and Sudan.¹⁰⁵ For the British, the idea that they might lose control of Egypt was a major concern throughout the war. For the Italians this would denote gaining control of the Suez Canal, one of the gates to its Mediterranean cage and a choke point to their colonies along the Red Sea. Perhaps even more important, it also eliminated Egypt’s potential as a base of attack for the British on both Italian East Africa and Libya.¹⁰⁶ To the British, the prospect was unacceptable and would lead to a crumbling of British strategy in the Middle East. According to Anthony Eden, not only was the potential to divide the Italian Empire present, but, “it is there that the [British] Empire can be cut in half ... The Middle East area, with Egypt and the Suez Canal as its core, is the meeting place of two continents and if Turkey be added, of three. It is thus one of the most important strategic areas in the world, and it is an area the defence of which is a matter of life and death to the British Empire ...”¹⁰⁷ For the British, the severance of Suez was a two-way disaster that blocked not only the shortest route to India, but access into the Mediterranean from the East which “*pro tanto* increase” with

¹⁰⁴ Mussolini, *My Autobiography*, 260.

¹⁰⁵ Bierman and Smith, *War Without Hate*, 11.

¹⁰⁶ Daly, *Imperial Sudan*, 128.

¹⁰⁷ Eden War Cabinet Memorandum, 13 April 1945, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs* Vol 2, CAB 66/65 WP (45) 256, p. 43.

the war. Accordingly, the loss of Suez would interfere with the transport of reinforcements and supplies coming from the east to west, which had become central to British defence plans.¹⁰⁸ As early as 1935, the Italian Army considered taking control of the chokepoint, “enlightened by Mussolini’s geopolitical musings about Mediterranean domination, [which] identified Egypt as Britain’s most vital position and as Italy’s key to hegemony.”¹⁰⁹

British thinking on Libya during World War II was initially offensive in relation to the Mediterranean, and defensive in relation to continental Libya. Like the Italians, emphasis was on the region’s connection to the Mediterranean Sea. But unlike the Italians, the British approached the maritime orientation quite differently. The Italians organized the Mediterranean in primarily a “north-south” manner, while the British were interested in a “west-east” approach.¹¹⁰ With two key commanders stationed at Gibraltar and Alexandria, this proved advantageous during the war. While it can be argued that the Italians central position split-up British forces, it was much more important that “the British would stop up both ends and trap Italy within. And indeed that is exactly what the British did.”¹¹¹

In spite of British determination to protect Egypt and Suez, they did not spend a lot of effort, prior to the war, bolstering land defenses along the Egyptian-Libyan border. While the Chamberlain government’s policy of appeasement, coupled with false comfort

¹⁰⁸ Sir Miles Lampson to Viscount Halifax Telegraph, 21 December 1938, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs* Vol 19, Doc 132 J4726/38/16, p 346.

¹⁰⁹ Knox, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, 86.

¹¹⁰ Ball, *The Bitter Sea*, 5.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 43. Andrew Cunningham managed the eastern Alexandria fleet and James Somerville was at Gibraltar in the west.

provided by the 1938 Anglo-Italian Agreement¹¹², was instrumental in this restraint, reports from the ground were equally important in devaluing the threat and influencing British policy concerning the terrain. British Colonel M. B. Burrow's assessment of the situation, as late as 1939, dismissed the likelihood of a land attack from Libya: "I have no hesitation in saying that the Italian forces in Libya at the present moment do not constitute an offensive danger to either Egypt or Tunis ... I form a very low opinion of the Libyan troops of all arms."¹¹³ Even when Italy sent 30,000 additional troops to Libya, the British were not concerned. Intelligence dismissed the possibility of invasion from Libya's eastern front which had very few troops. According to their assessment, most of the Libyan troops were stationed on Libya's western front and were more of a threat to Tunisia.¹¹⁴ Of course, this position was short-lived. By November of 1940, Sir Miles Lampson wrote to Norton:

Egypt is so obviously a key point in our whole Imperial system that I was often gravely worried lest we should take our responsibilities here too lightly. But we are now much better off generally: and as regards the land I feel a great weight taken off. I wish I could feel the same about the air: but there too, given the necessary respite, this should by all accounts be remedied in time. But I confess I still dread that awful time-lag before promised reinforcements arrive. (Can you hurry them up? Do try!!)¹¹⁵

¹¹² More information on the Anglo-Italian Treaty can be found in Morewood's *British Defence of Egypt*.

¹¹³ Colonel Burrows to the Ambassador (Sir Miles Lampson), 5 June 1939, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs* Vol 30, Doc 165 J2363/33/66, p. 347.

¹¹⁴ Morewood, *The British Defence of Egypt*, 121.

¹¹⁵ Sir Miles Lampson to Clifford Norton, 13 November 1940, FO 371, Eg/40/19.

It was in 1941, when the fighting took a turn for the better, that British attitude concerning Libya and its value shifted. In an enthusiastic broadcast, Prime Minister Churchill described how Libya was almost free, starting with Cyrenaica:

The entire Province of Cyrenaica—nearly as big as England and Wales—has been conquered. The unhappy Arab tribes, who have for thirty years suffered from the cruelty of Italian rule, carried in some cases to the point of methodical extermination, these Bedouin survivors have at last seen their oppressors in disorderly flight, or led off in endless droves as prisoners of war.¹¹⁶

Of course, Libya was not genuinely free. The Mediterranean Theater and the Desert Campaigns are often described as a series of battles that ebbed and flowed, but when they were finally over in 1943, it was decisive in regards to Libya. There was no doubt that Great Britain would now play a role in the region's future. While some Italians remained in an administrative capacity, primarily in Tripolitania, and the French occupied Fezzan, Britain contemplated the region's overall future. Their first consideration was self-interest; what value the British Empire could extract from the provinces. Even though the concept of imperialism had grown unpopular in global culture, it was not dead in British strategy. Politicians and military leaders began to question: What promise was hidden in Libya for Great Britain? Should we keep it? If so, how can we use it? And if we decide against keeping it, what do we do with it?

The value of Libya for Great Britain, like that of Italy, was greatest along the coastline. Rationale concerning its utilization, however, was dissimilar. Colonization of

¹¹⁶ Winston Churchill Broadcast, 9 February 1941, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs* Vol 1, C1458/1458/18, p. 4.

the provinces was unimportant in British strategy. Globally the concept was out of favor, and already on its way to the history books. Although the British were interested in maintaining control of at least a portion of the region, it was its strategic value that attracted them. Unlike the Italians, who were engaged in linking the entire region to Europe through its Mediterranean roots, with the idea of expanding the Italian Empire, the majority of British plans during the war involved dissecting the provinces and linking them to three very different parts of the world; Tripolitania to Europe, Fezzan to Africa, and Cyrenaica to the Middle East. First and foremost in British planning was the province of Cyrenaica, which they knew would benefit them the most with a Middle East connection, either directly or indirectly. This connection was important to both discretely improve their global position and limit their obligations. Through this linkage, the British believed they could maximize their strategic goals and unilaterally check their involvement in affairs unbeneficial to the empire. Their interest in this region soon developed into a dialogue over how the area might enhance British strategy.

Cyrenaica's nearness to Egypt was always an important characteristic in these debates. Even though Egypt was granted independence after World War I, it was widely known that the country was run by a "three-legged stool: King Fuad, the British, and the Wafd."¹¹⁷ Out of the three, the British position of power was traditionally the strongest. Linking Cyrenaica to Egypt would, in theory, guarantee maximum benefits for Great Britain because it attached the region to a nation already under British control. The only problem with this plan was that British rule in Egypt was faltering. In the 1936 Anglo-

¹¹⁷ Goldschmidt, *A Brief History of Egypt*, 108. King Fuad was the Egyptian monarch until his death in 1937.

Egyptian Treaty mentioned in Chapter One, the accords not only imparted a certain level of security to Egyptians, who were concerned with an Italian invasion, but it also outlined a gradual withdraw of British occupation from Egypt. Articles One, Seven, and Eight were particularly important in this matter. While Article One provided a generic assertion that Britain would no longer occupy Egypt militarily, Article Seven granted a loophole that allowed the British to remain during the war. Article Eight widened that loophole further, providing specific instructions regarding occupation of the Suez Canal beyond the war, which was of particular value to the British.¹¹⁸ While the treaty provided stability to ensure British mission requirements during World War II were met, it did not offer a permanent solution to fortifying postwar British Middle East strategy. If British power was going to expire in Cairo, then strategists needed to find a way to revoke that expiration, or uncover an alternative location where the British could transfer their power base. Could Cyrenaica in some way repair Britain's broken relationship with Egypt? Or, was it more valuable as a replacement to the British position within Egypt?

Even before the "third battle of Alamein or, as perhaps it would be better to call it, the Battle for Egypt,"¹¹⁹ the British were considering the future of British power in the Middle East, especially Egypt. First, it was ground zero for the Suez Canal. As described earlier, its geographical position and maintaining control of the waterway was critical in British planning. According to a Chief of Staff review conducted in 1940, protecting the Suez Canal was at the top of a short list of British objectives for the Middle

¹¹⁸ The Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936, Article 8, gave the British up to 20 years to withdraw from the Canal Zone.

¹¹⁹ Prime Minister Churchill's Address at Press Conference in Cairo, 2 February 1943, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs* Vol 2, Enc 2 in J1023/2/16 No 28, p. 108.

East.¹²⁰ All the same, Suez was not the only reason the British valued Egypt. Equally, if not more important, was the way Egypt was serving as the nucleus of British operations in the Middle East coupled with the statement of British power it had grown to represent over time.

Cairo was home to many British institutions, such as the Middle East Supply Center, the Middle East Intelligence Center, and Middle East Headquarters. Militarily, the short and long term advantages offered by Egypt were, at least during the war, irreplaceable. Although the British were obligated to ultimately withdraw their military presence in accordance with the provisions of the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian treaty, the terms of that treaty favored British strategic goals. Ironically, the presence of troops during the war was made possible by the same treaty, which provided enough flexibility and stability to ensure troop disruption was limited. Articles Seven and Eight (and their wartime provisions) provided for more than enough necessity and just a touch of ambiguity, so British planners could utilize Egypt to their full advantage. Although the treaty restricted British troops to 10,000 in peacetime, there was no limit during times of war. The British took full advantage of the 1936 provisions to expand on what became “Britain’s primary military staging area for the whole of the Middle East” taking “three and a half years of feverish construction activity during the war to bring it to its final stage” and it became “in fact, the largest British military base in the world, 120 miles long and thirty miles wide at its widest point.”¹²¹ The only British base larger than the

¹²⁰ Kolinsky, *Britain’s War*, 108.

¹²¹ Tignor, *Capitalism and Nationalism*, 47.

one in Egypt was in England herself.¹²² Additionally, Egypt “... had three deep-water ports (especially Alexandria) and a railway between Suez and Palestine’s deep-water port at Haifa. Cheap labour was plentiful. And, however inhospitable the desert, there was plenty of room for military installations without wasting precious agricultural land.”¹²³ As luck would have it, even the inhospitable desert proved advantageous during World War II. As part of the imperial colonial force, the troops stationed in Egypt held a distinct advantage compared to those committed to the traditional continental war back home. First, the units in Egypt were almost at full strength, even though they were small. But more importantly, “they were able to train across the almost limitless land that they were to fight over in 1940. Therein lay one of the reasons why O’Connor’s small force was able to defeat the much larger Italian 10th Army in the opening campaign of the desert war.”¹²⁴ With troop disparity at colossal levels, allied forces numbering approximately 30,000 and Axis troop strength at an estimated 80,000, the fact that British forces within Egypt had become experts in the terrain was essential.

During Britain’s occupation of Egypt, the military also invested heavily in technological advances that were instrumental in transporting British striking power throughout the Middle East. As early as 1926, Sir M. Hankey exclaimed, “It is of great strategic importance to maintain our aerial establishments in Egypt, particularly those at Heliopolis (near Cairo) and Aboukir (near Alexandria), which constitute the air supply

¹²² Kolinsky, *Britain’s War*, 3.

¹²³ Cooper, *Cairo during the War*, 44.

¹²⁴ Ibid. Richard Nugent O’Connor was a Major General in the British Army during World War II and led the campaign from Mersa Matruh. Although there is debate on the number of troops engaged, it is clear that his forces were at least outnumbered 2 to 1.

centre for the whole of the Middle East. The radio-telegraphic station at Abuzabel, near Cairo, is also of strategic importance.”¹²⁵

With so much invested in Egypt, the British would be hard pressed to find another location that served their needs as completely. Needless to say, much of their reliance upon Egypt was a self-inflicted predicament. The British had willingly spent time, resources, and funds to strengthen their position in Egypt, an arrangement they knew was doomed to come to an end. The 1936 treaty's wartime provisions were just that, wartime provisions, and only so many loopholes existed to extend the British presence within Egypt. While the Egyptians had become tolerant of the British presence when they were threatened by an Italian invasion, they did not want a permanent presence after the war. When it became apparent that the British had won the desert campaigns, Egypt's greatest threat was over. As Egyptian displeasure over the British presence became more vocalized, and as they began to nag the British over how quickly they could depart at war's end, British planners increased efforts to appease the Egyptians with the hopes that they could somehow extend their stay. But if the Egyptians were determined to expel the British after the war, where would they go? A solution must be found. During their deliberations, the idea that Cyrenaica might play a part in either idea came up over and over again.

The British were realistic in their desire to placate the Egyptians and win concessions after the war. They knew ultimately they might be forced to withdraw, but wanted to keep as many of the resources they had invested in during the war as possible and minimize their losses. One possible option was to grant the Egyptians territory after

¹²⁵ Sir M. Hankey Memorandum, January 1926, CAB 63/38, p. 45-46.

the war. If this pleased the Egyptians, maybe the British could renegotiate with them and maintain many of their possessions in Egypt. Civil Affairs Branch correspondence explains, “... a gift of this kind to Egypt might make it easier for us to gain our strategic objectives in Egypt, whatever they may be decided to be.”¹²⁶ As early as 1941, the Egyptian government declared that an offer of additional land would be welcomed in postwar negotiations. In correspondence between Sir Miles Lampson and Sir Anthony Eden, it was stated that regardless of what Egyptian government was in power at war’s end, all Egyptian parties were “... in agreement on one issue, namely, the necessity of exploiting the war to secure treaty and even territorial concessions from Great Britain.”¹²⁷ Since the Egyptians had shown interest in annexing territories to their south (Sudan) and to the east (Cyrenaica), the British considered how these regions might benefit them as bargaining chips. To begin, Sudan was never really on the table for negotiation. While the Egyptians argued that “Egypt and the Sudan were ‘one country and one people indivisible, inseparable,” in reality the two nations shared less than is commonly admitted in scholarship. To support this allegation, historian Derek Hopwood asserts, “Only a proportion of the Sudanese population spoke Arabic and was Muslim and the two countries had never been united under the Egyptian crown, although parts of the Sudan had been administered by Egypt (or by Egyptians on behalf of the Ottoman Empire) during the nineteenth century.”¹²⁸ Another reason the Sudan was never seriously considered was the British insistence that Sudan determine her own fate, a pivotal part of

¹²⁶ Note by Babbs in Response to Paper Written by Major Evans-Pritchard on Cyrenaica, 1 June 1944, FO141/944.

¹²⁷ Sir Miles Lampson to Sir Anthony Eden, 28 January 1941, FO 141/31574, p. 8.

¹²⁸ Hopwood, *Egypt, Politics and Society*, 25.

British foreign policy. Not to mention, the fact that an Egyptian ruled Sudan was by and large unpopular in Sudan herself. The prospect of giving all or part of Cyrenaica to the Egyptians, on the other hand, was an option the British considered. Not only did Cyrenaica share much in common with Egypt, but attaching Cyrenaica to the Middle East was beneficial both strategically and diplomatically for the British. The Royal Institute of International Affairs confirms that the British government did consider giving Cyrenaica, as a whole, to the Egyptians. One idea was to attach the entire province to Egypt as a dependency.¹²⁹ Still, the idea of giving only a portion was equally debated. One such prospect was to give the Egyptians Jarabub, an outpost on the Libyan-Egyptian border.

Jarabub was a remote oasis in south-east Cyrenaica. To the casual observer, it might appear as little more than a water stop in a vast sea of sand, but the borough had a history that made it valuable to both tribesmen and the Egyptians. In 1855, when the Senussi were threatened along Cyrenaica's coast by the French, they moved inland to Jarabub and established a headquarters there.¹³⁰ Additionally, the tomb of the Senussi founder was located there,¹³¹ and it also held religious significance for Muslims. Lastly, it had historically belonged to Egypt until the 1920s when the Italians were able to broker a deal with the British for its possession. The Egyptian Wafdist government fought the measure adamantly, but internal political changes ultimately led to their acceptance of the territorial loss. "The new council of ministers included no members of the Wafd, but consisted entirely of Liberal Constitutionalists, Nationalists, and independents ... At that point, Cairo's resistance to the Italian campaign to seize al-Jarabub collapsed. The [new]

¹²⁹ Royal Institute of International Affairs, Information Papers No 19, p. 83.

¹³⁰ Vandewalle, *A History of Modern Libya*, 19.

¹³¹ Lawson, *Re-Envisioning Egypt*, 48.

Ziwar cabinet, entirely dependent upon the palace for its incumbency, quickly fell in with Britain's expressed wishes."¹³²

So even before the region officially shifted from Italian to British control, the Egyptians and the British were discussing the possibility of the lost oasis returning to Egyptian sovereignty. In a 1941 conversation between King Farouk and Sir Miles Lampson, the king stated that he would formally request Jarabub at the conclusion of the war. He further stated that the letter would include correspondence conducted with Lord Kitchener where he had promised Bardia to Egypt, but what Egypt really wanted was Jarabub. Quoting the king, "Whatever happens about Libya after the war, Egypt wants Jarabub back, not only for strategic reasons, but for religious reasons."¹³³

Egyptian and British efforts to link Cyrenaica to Egypt, and the Middle East, did not stop at merely Jarabub. Expanding the Egyptian border and linking all of Cyrenaica to Egypt was also contemplated during the war. Creative ways of strengthening the connection were prevalent. But as to be expected, most British officials were not ready to openly support the merger, and they preferred to wait out the war before making rash decisions. What could the British possibly gain by committing the territory, either directly or indirectly, to Egypt at this point and time? It was fine to dream about the prospects of the region, and how expanding Egypt might benefit the British in the future, but it was another thing to commit completely to annexation so early in the game. For example, throughout 1943 there was a debate over whether to allow the Egyptian State Railroad (ESR) to operate and maintain the newly extended lines going through

¹³² Ibid., 60-61.

¹³³ Sir Miles Lampson Foreign Office Telegram, 1 January 1941, FO 371/27428.

Cyrenaica, as well as debates over Egyptians holding government positions within Cyrenaica.

As early as 1912, the Italians had made limited progress in establishing a railway in Libya. Much like their colonization efforts, their focus was primarily on Tripolitania and the coastline. Efforts began in Tripoli, with lines heading conservatively outward to the east, west, and south. At the same time, work began in Cyrenaica heading westward. At both locations, the primary purpose of the railways was military in nature, but passenger service was also available and useful during the 1930s with the arrival of immigrants and the colonization movement.¹³⁴ Like the *Litoranea Libica*, the rail lines were also useful in joining and strengthening the divide between Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. Yet all of the Italian's efforts at linking and expanding the railways were modest in size, especially considering the length of time they occupied the region. When Britain gained control of the terrain in 1943, jurisdiction of the Libyan railroads fell under the British Military Administration (BMA). Much like the Italians, their primary interest in these assets was to use them for military transport, especially since the war was still in flux. At the time, Egypt only had rail service going westward to Mersa Matruh, but once the British gained control of territory in Libya the line was extended by the army across the border into Cyrenaica as far as Tobruk.¹³⁵ This led to a particularly interesting battle between different British offices, particularly military and political offices, over the potential of awarding railway contracts to the Egyptians who were increasingly enthusiastic over any prospect that tied Egypt to the western province.

¹³⁴ Brant, *Railroads of North Africa*, 176-179.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 181.

During this time, the Egyptians were already maintaining the line up to the city of Mersa Matruh, whereas the British Army railway construction companies sustained the extension that was built into Cyrenaica. In 1943, the Army brought up the idea of allowing the Egyptians to run the complete line. According to R. G. Casey, this request was initiated because of manpower shortages, where “... three Dominion transportation units have recently been withdrawn and it may be necessary to withdraw further units now engaged on maintenance work west of Matruh. The Army is therefore considering getting the E.S.R. to take over maintenance of the track beyond Matruh.”¹³⁶ On the surface, this request appeared harmless enough, but the British Ambassador in Cairo was quick to point out that allowing the Egyptians to operate and maintain the railway beyond the border, and into Cyrenaica, could easily be used by Egypt as “an argument in support of any future claims [in Cyrenaica] the Egyptian government may make.”¹³⁷ He supplemented his argument by stating that King Farouk¹³⁸ had already discussed annexing Cyrenaica with Prime Minister Churchill, so the Egyptians were posturing to gain control of the region. Awarding these contracts would not only strengthen Egyptian resolve, but would put the British at a disadvantage when they became ready to negotiate. Although awarding the contracts would alleviate the burden of the military and potentially strengthen relations with Egypt, they also had to question every aspect of what an expanded Egypt would mean for Britain. As of 1943, they were not ready for such a commitment. After several months of debate, and various attempts to compromise, the idea was finally put to rest. E. A. Chapman-Andrews of the Foreign Office to Major

¹³⁶ R. G. Casey Middle East War Council Subcommittee Memorandum, 29 March 1943, FO 1015/35.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Replaced his father, King Fuad, as Egyptian monarch in 1937.

R.H.R Taylor of the War Office explained “... in the Ambassador’s opinion there are still the strongest political objections to allowing the Egyptians to operate the railway in question, even on a commercial basis, and that the Minister of State and Commander-in-Chief, Middle East agree with him. Under these circumstances, we can scarcely pursue the matter further.”¹³⁹

A parallel debate in 1943 over the appointment of an Egyptian ‘educationalist’ to the position of Superintendent of Education in Cyrenaica caused an equal stir. Proposed by the Civil Affairs Branch, it was suggested that an Egyptian in the position was advantageous from an “educational point of view.”¹⁴⁰ But the military was quick to point out “in our opinion this proposal is politically more risky than the earlier one [about railroad contracts]; and we agree that we cannot weigh its practical advantages against those risks until we know a lot more about the future of Cyrenaica.”¹⁴¹ In September of that same year, the Foreign Office again ended the dispute and wrote to Cairo: “we share your doubts about this proposal which should not (repeat not) be put to the Egyptian government. War Office concur and are notifying the Civil Affairs Branch accordingly.”¹⁴²

On the other hand, even though most British leadership wanted to wait until the war was over to make any lasting decisions concerning Cyrenaica, there were some who saw the connection of the territory to Egypt, or the Middle East in general, as inevitable

¹³⁹ Major R.H.R. Taylor War Office to the Foreign Office, 1 June 1943, FO 1015/35.

¹⁴⁰ P. Scrivener in Cairo to Foreign Office, 30 August 1943, FO1015/35.

¹⁴¹ Lieutenant Colonel G.S. Mirehouse to Lieutenant Colonel French, 2 September 1943, FO 1015/35.

¹⁴² Foreign Office Response to Mr. Shone Telegram 1652, 7 September 1943, FO 1015/35.

and the only solution. According to Major E. E. Evans-Pritchard, “Cyrenaica is the most completely Arabized country outside Arabia” and this merger would ensure:

... Cyrenaica will have returned to the world to which she belongs by tradition and culture. The tourniquet which the Italians placed between her and the body of which she is a member will be loosened and the blood of the Arab renaissance will run through her veins from the great hearts of Cairo, Beyrout, Mecca, and Baghdad.¹⁴³

While this poetic amalgamation explains the region’s inherent disposition toward the Middle East, and how that bond was tested under the Italians, the geopolitical value of annexation by Egypt for the British in this testament is limited to diplomatic benefits. In addition to its capability as a tool of appeasement with the Egyptians, for the British it was strategically promising. At the forefront of this thinking was the possibility of Cyrenaica as an alternative location for the installations within Egypt, especially those that had thickened around Suez. In this scenario, the British would withdraw from Egypt proper and move their resources to the west. But, the Egyptians were not the only potential managers for this future dream site. The possibilities of allowing the natives to either rule the region completely, or under the Egyptians, in some type of ancillary manner, were equally taken into account.

Unlike the Italians, the British knew colonization was a dated practice.

Unpopular internationally, and expensive to boot, the British believed the future of the empire was headed toward a balancing act of limited intervention. Several possibilities

¹⁴³ Major E. E. Evans-Pritchard Memorandum, “A Note on the Place of Cyrenaica in the Arab World, and its Future,” 4 January 1944, FO 141/944.

existed for either collective or individual governance of the provinces. As described earlier, some of these outcomes involved annexation of Cyrenaica by Egypt, but this was not the only outcome envisioned during the war. While the concept of one-nation was considered, it was much more popular to contemplate the division of the three provinces: Tripolitania linked to Europe in some way, Fezzan possibly to Africa, and Cyrenaica to the Middle East. Out of the three, the future of Cyrenaica was the most important to the British, and because of that reason, the British focused most of their energy on multiple ways to attach the region to the Middle East. Ironically, the most popular of these plans was not a direct annexation by Egypt, but for the region to fall exclusively, or partially, under the rule of the local inhabitants. Empowering Sheikh Sidi Idris was the most likely of the propositions. The British relationship with this chieftain stemmed from many years of cooperation in dealing with a common ingredient, Italy. When the British served as mediators between the two parties during their negotiations after World War I¹⁴⁴, they formed a bond with Sidi Idris that continued throughout his exile in Egypt where he “remained head of the nascent Cyrenacian nationalist movement.”¹⁴⁵ When Sidi Idris returned to Cyrenaica in 1943, he had years of cooperation with the British under his belt, and it was natural for the British to “throw their support behind him” in a “Parliamentary pledge to the Senussi against the common Italian enemy.”¹⁴⁶ In this 1942 oath, the British vowed the Senussi would never fall under the rule of the Italians again. During a meeting of the Foreign Office Sub-Committee on Armistice Terms with Italy that same

¹⁴⁴ Bruce St John, *Libya: From Colony to Independence*, 66. During the war, there was also a debate over making the region a Jewish province, but it never received the support or attention that was characteristic of the other plans.

¹⁴⁵ Louis, *The British Empire in the Middle East*, 269.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

year, it was explained that this promise did not necessarily mean that the Senussi would rule the region, but neither did it exclude the possibility.¹⁴⁷ At the war's conclusion, British favor of Sidi Idris continued, and the idea that Libya, especially Cyrenaica, might someday fall under his command persisted. In 1946, Ernest Bevin, the British Foreign Secretary, praised the role Sidi Idris played as an ally and noted the debt Britain owed him:

El Sayed Idris el Senussi is the acknowledged leader of the people, as well of the Senussi religious sect, and it was he who in January 1942 was thanked by name by Mr. Eden for the assistance which he had given during the Western Desert campaign. He should be awarded an honorary K.B.E. and the Military Administration should bring into the use the title of Emire in its honorific application.¹⁴⁸

British officials only considered the idea of a strong and independent Libya under indigenous rule, however, if the natives supported a British agenda. This was a requirement of any potential suitor. As the strongest native advocate of Great Britain at the conclusion of the war, Idris was in a rock-solid position to gain control of at least Cyrenaica, if not all three provinces.

Although Sidi Idris was clearly the favored native option for governance in the provinces by the British, he was not the only local choice considered by British policymakers. In 1944, the British were presented with a petition from an opposing group who wanted to rule Tripolitania separately, without Senussi interference.

¹⁴⁷ Foreign Office Sub-Committee Meeting with minutes by G F Seel, G E J Gent, Sir W Battershill, Sir G Gater, and Mr. Stanley, 31 December 1942, CO 323/1859/10.

¹⁴⁸ Ernest Bevin Memorandum, 23 September 1946, CAB 129/13.

According to their plea, the British must allow them to create a committee to govern the province. Dismissing the regions strong European connection and immigrant population, these lobbyists embraced their Arab roots, but also wanted to highlight their unique culture from their Senussi neighbors. Subsequently, “without this Committee it will not be possible to gain the favour of the people of Tripolitania and their true love and the realization of British democratic principles in that country.”¹⁴⁹ Despite the fact that a separate administration for Tripolitania was considered numerous times in British planning, this idea of an Arab administration by these particular locals was quickly dismissed. First, the petitioners were exiles who had been out of Tripolitania for many years. Although it was acknowledged that three of the supplicants “are men of some standing” it was equally expressed that they “are totally out of touch with public opinion inside their own country.”¹⁵⁰ Most of them had spent many years in Egypt, and they more closely represented the nationalist fervor that had swept the region in general, rather than any real movement on behalf of the Tripolitanians. The main reason for Britain’s dismissal, however, was that turning over the province to these men held little advantage for the British. Even though a great deal of their strategy involved tying Cyrenaica to the Middle East, their plans for Tripolitania did not follow that mold. Allowing Tripolitania to have its own government, under an Arab administration provided no benefits for the British. It only promoted instability and the potential for tribal rivalry. Therefore, if the provinces were to be split, it was better to allow them to follow the natural order of things: Tripolitania to Europe, Cyrenaica to the Middle East, and Fezzan to Africa.

¹⁴⁹ Translation of Petition from Ahmed El Suweihli, Aon Mohamed Suf, El Taher el Muraiyid, Mansur Geddara, 4 May 1944, FO141/944.

¹⁵⁰ Norman Andersen to T.C. Ravensdale, 14 June 1944, FO 141/944.

With that in mind, the British believed that the future for an individually administered Tripolitania should be linked to Europe in some manner. But, who should be entrusted with the province? One proposal was to hand the territory over to France, or to link Tripolitania to Tunisia. In regards to Tunisia, however, opponents felt there were enough problems in that nation, between Italians and the French, without contributing to them further by expanding the state.¹⁵¹ Additionally, some nations were concerned that if the French were granted Tripolitania, then they would most likely retain Fezzan, and that could in-turn lead to a French Cyrenaica. No, it was better to keep Tripolitania under a controllable European power. Unexpectedly, the plan that became most prevalent in British debates was to return the province to the Italians.

British foreign policy pertaining to Italy, even before their surrender, hinted at some territorial retention for the Italians. While the Foreign Office was not willing to return all of the Italian Colonies, they were willing to consider the return of Tripolitania. This was because of the substantial Italian population in the province, even as the war progressed, and the lack of potential for future British planning.¹⁵² Also, when the Foreign Office began considering the terms of an armistice in 1942, they were influenced by the fact that “the Italian solution was ... preferred by the Egyptian Department on the grounds that a large French bloc continuous to Egypt might possibly be a menace in 50 years time.”¹⁵³ While the idea of returning Cyrenaica to the Italians was out of the question, due in small part to the promises made by British government to the Senussi, no

¹⁵¹ Bruce St John, *Libya: From Colony to Independence*, 88.

¹⁵² Foreign Office Sub-Committee Meeting with minutes by G F Seel, G E J Gent, Sir W Battershill, Sir G Gater, and Mr. Stanley, 31 December 1942, CO 323/1859/10.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

such assurance restricted the British in their deliberations concerning Tripolitania. As a result of these factors, and because quickly rebuilding a relationship with Italy would benefit the British, sponsorship of an Italian Tripolitania, moved to the top of deliberations concerning the future of the region.

Although the British government underwent a significant transformation of leadership at the end of the war, policy concerning Italy remained fairly consistent even during that change. If anything, the idea that Tripolitania might return to the Italians actually strengthened. During the war, the most influential figure in determining Italian policy was the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, with the Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, playing only a minimal role. Yet, when Clement Attlee stepped into the Prime Minister's seat, he was not the driving force Churchill had been during the war. Instead, the new Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin became the key representative in regards to British policy related to the former Italian colonies. He, along with officials in the Foreign Office and the Chiefs of Staff, negotiated the peace with Italy and were influenced by the desire to improve relations with them. This resulted in a continuity of deliberations to link Tripolitania to Italy that lasted all the way up to 1949.

The Italians were equally anxious to retain their colonies, especially Libya. The new government that replaced the Fascists was quick to inform Allied administrators that their policies in regard to the colonies were unlike those of Mussolini's government, and more in line with those of the Italian democratic government before 1922.¹⁵⁴ Of particular importance in their plea was the assertion that the colonies would be used as a "means for absorbing Italy's surplus manpower" and not as "the instrument of

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 114.

imperialism.”¹⁵⁵ With facilities already in place, and because of its geographical proximity, Libya was vital to Italy’s attempts at economic recovery which were in dire straits. These statements did two things for British policymakers. First, they addressed overpopulation which was associated with Italy’s economic recovery, and second, they alleviated concerns that Italy would return to expansionist policies for the sake of reclaiming a position as an empire. To the British, it was important that Italy regain stability economically in order to serve as a secure ally, but it was equally important that Italy was compelled “to give up all pretence to being a great power.”¹⁵⁶

The British, Egyptians, native Libyans, French, and Italians were not the only parties interested in the future of coastal Libya. As the war progressed, countless other nations came forward and expressed their desire to receive some or all of the spoils of war. For instance the Greeks, who shared many of the same geographical characteristics and social difficulties as the Italians, expressed interest early in the war. In a 1942 Foreign Office sub-committee meeting, it was stated:

The Greeks ... had hinted to us, and had told the Americans more explicitly, that they would like in some way to be established on the southern shore of the Mediterranean close to the Greek coast, and there was no doubt it might be possible for some of their surplus population to take the place of the departed Italian colonists.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.,114.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.,115.

¹⁵⁷ Foreign Office Sub-Committee Meeting with minutes by G F Seel, G E J Gent, Sir W Battershill, Sir G Gater, and Mr. Stanley, 31 December 1942, CO 323/1859/10.

According to Sir W. Battershill, a deputy under-secretary of state at the time, the appeal of Libya and any territory, either situated on the Mediterranean or outside of it, was not limited to only a few nations. Every state involved, particularly those of the Mediterranean, would clamor for a share of the spoils:

We shall be faced after this war many claims for territories in the Mediterranean. Greece wants the Dodecanese, Cyprus and part of North Africa. Turkey wants the Dodecanese, Egypt wants a slice of North Africa and I have no doubt that there will be Arab claims in North Africa, while the French will expect something.¹⁵⁸

The something that seemed most probable for the French was the Fezzan. In comparison to the wide-spread interest of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica during the war, the rumblings over Fezzan were relatively mild. When the Allies expelled the Axis from Libya in 1943, the three provinces fell under the conquerors control in the form of military administrations. In Cyrenaica and Tripolitania the provinces were governed by the British Military Administration (BMA) until 1949.¹⁵⁹ A similar administration was established in the Fezzan, however, it was under the auspices of the French Military Administration (FMA) and lasted until 1951. The basic concepts of these administrations were similar. Both the BMA and FMA occupied the regions under the fundamental guidance of the 1907 Hague Convention which bound their involvement in regional interaction to “workmanlike care and maintenance”¹⁶⁰ and which “limited a military occupation to a holding operation until an international body determined the future of the

¹⁵⁸ Sir W. D. Battershill Minute, 26 January 1943, CO 323/1859/10.

¹⁵⁹ Vandewalle, *A History of Modern Libya*, 36-37.

¹⁶⁰ Bills, *The Libyan Arena*, 23.

occupied territory.”¹⁶¹ But like the British in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, speculation over the future of the region infiltrated French policy and loopholes existed that allowed the French to manipulate local and international affairs during occupation. The French were at liberty to imagine ways they could influence international politics, allowing them to ensconce themselves permanently, or at the very least, extract privileges and rights that benefited their African Empire at war’s end.

For the French, Fezzan was both economically and strategically promising. It was “an important staging area for French Equatorial Africa”¹⁶² and “Libya’s strategic location as the closest region to western Africa across the Mediterranean meant that three of the five major trade routes went through Libya.”¹⁶³ Additionally, although the forecast for oil in Libya was not a prevalent motivator for the majority of nations during this time, in the later part of the 1940s, “French engineers had started to prospect for oil across the Libyan Algerian border.”¹⁶⁴ For all of these reasons, Fezzan was the perfect addition to their colonial assets in Africa.¹⁶⁵ Plus, culturally the region had always had more in common with its Central and Maghreb¹⁶⁶ African pedigree than with either a direct European Connection, like the Italians had pursued, or a strictly Middle East relationship, like that of the British. For those reasons, the French had every reason to believe that if they were granted the province permanently, it would likely succeed. Yet, who had the

¹⁶¹ Bruce St John, *Libya: From Colony to Independence*, 86.

¹⁶² Vandewalle, *A History of Modern Libya*, 40.

¹⁶³ Ahmida, *Forgotten Voices*, 3.

¹⁶⁴ Vandewalle, *A History of Modern Libya*, 40.

¹⁶⁵ See Map 4. Portion of War Office Map dated 1930 from Overleaf in Cabinet Paper by Secretary of State of Foreign Affairs John Simons, 16 Jan 1934, CAB/24/247.

¹⁶⁶ In this instance, Megrib is defined as the lands of northwest Africa that are positioned on the Mediterranean to the west of Libya. Modern day Libya is more closely associated with the Mashriq, or the east and Egypt. As a whole, the position of Libya is unique as a border between east and west. For more on nomenclature, see Held’s *Middle East Patterns: Places, People, and Politics*.

authority to grant the French territorial rights? The ability to simply claim territory, as imperialists had done during the Scramble for Africa a half century earlier, no longer applied. Like many nations who were interested in staking their claim in Libya, the French at the end of World War II were left wondering exactly what it would take to obtain their prize.

Libya's worth changed dramatically to external powers over the course of the Second World War. As a catalyst, the conflict propelled Libya into the spotlight, but to what end? Although the war broadcast Libya's value and compelled many nations to take interest, the future of the region grew murkier. Because many nations were interested in acquiring their share of the terrain, it became increasingly difficult to predict the future of the provinces. If wartime negotiations were any indication, it was likely that they would be partitioned in accordance with British strategic goals: Tripolitania to Europe, Cyrenaica to the Middle East, and the Fezzan to French Africa. Yet, that was not how the story ended. Increased worth did not equal a future for Libya. If anything, it made the road to settling Libya even more problematic.

CHAPTER 3: SETTling LIBYA: POSTWAR RESOLUTIONS AND THE UNITED NATIONS

World War II was a turning point in Libya's development with a rise in international attention as well as preemptive planning geared toward the region's future and national self-interest. Before the conflict, Libya barely garnered any attention, with only the Italians championing her worth. Yet as the war progressed, more and more nations came to realize that the provinces had a great deal to offer.

That perception did not end immediately after the war, but continued for several years afterwards. The British were especially determined to see something positive come out of their acquisition of Libya. But instead of just imagining ways the region might benefit them, the postwar years were characterized by a flurry of practical planning and international negotiations driven by the desire to transform wartime dreams into reality. Unlike the era of Italian colonization, where literally *settling* citizens defined policy, the early postwar years were defined by efforts to *settle* the future of Libya through dialogue and resolutions. Most of these plans continued to focus on connecting Cyrenaica to the Middle East, Tripolitania to Europe, and the Fezzan to French Africa. These divisions were encouraged, especially by the British, in a variety of ways. For example, each territory used a different currency, "Egyptian pounds in Cyrenaica, Algerian Francs in the Fezzan, and the military-authority lire, or mal—currency issued by the British Army—in Tripolitania."¹⁶⁷ For the most part, the value of the provinces remained high.

¹⁶⁷ Wechsberg, "Letter from Libya," 10 November 1951.

Just as had taken place during the war, the British were particularly involved in the formalities and bureaucracy that followed it.¹⁶⁸ They spent time, energy, and influence in their quest to ensure the region paid out large British dividends. But all of these efforts were not enough to stop the matter from becoming an international one. How was that possible? When had British influence been replaced by international power, and how had it come to pass so quickly? The truth was that international change had been brewing for a long time. Not only had World War II influenced the fate of Libya conventionally, as a spoil of war, but it also enhanced a deluge of idealistic change. Born out of the desires of many nations, Libya's future became a global question that was settled by international means. Influenced by the shrinking world, Libya's fate moved forward at a snail's pace with the Big Four¹⁶⁹ pulling the strings. When it was said and done, an independent and free Libya was created. But, was it truly free? Even as such, Imperialist ambition survived in the settlement, hidden among strides of international cooperation. Libya became a single nation, but only because external powers made it that way.

The Big Four were at the forefront of many of the deliberations that ensued after the war. Out of this group, Great Britain was the most concerned during the postwar years with Libya. Because the British occupied Cyrenaica and Tripolitania since 1943, they were at the vanguard of planning Libya's future, and this did not change in the years immediately following the war. Just as Churchill's government before them, the newly

¹⁶⁸ For more on Britain's penchant for expanding the role of state after World War II, see Heyck's *The Peoples of the British Isles* Chapter 12 "Illusions of Power: Politics and Foreign Relations, 1945-1970."

¹⁶⁹ Depending upon the context and time period, various documentation also mentions a 'Big Five' that included China, and sometimes only a 'Big Three' that excluded France. The 'Big Four' means Great Britain, United States, Soviet Union, and France.

appointed Labour government pursued a policy that encouraged the division of Libya, with the future of Cyrenaica playing a particularly British role. Because of this, they spent an enormous amount of energy devising methods of retaining their influence in the province. Three leading options emerged concerning the administration of Cyrenaica that would allow the British to accomplish their goals; a continuation of a British administration, Cyrenaica administered by the natives under the guidance of Great Britain, and Cyrenaica as a part of Egypt.

Britain often considered linking at least part of the region to Egypt. This plan not only stayed on the minds of British policymakers after the war, but it intensified. The relationship between the British and the Egyptians was tumultuous as a result of the war and a lengthy occupation. They were at a crucial turning point, and the British knew it. At the same time, the Egyptians were pressuring the British for revisions of the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty, and Cyrenaica had the potential to play an important role in those negotiations.

After World War II Egypt was abuzz with anti-British feeling. Demonstrations over the continued occupation of their nation by the British were common. Nationalist fervor was enhanced even further by the removal of press censorship in 1945 which provided Egyptian nationalists another outlet to communicate calls for the British to depart.¹⁷⁰ During that same year, when Egypt's Prime Minister, Ahmad Mahir, finally stopped Egypt's neutrality and declared war on the Axis in order to gain international favor and possible admission to the United Nations, he was immediately assassinated.¹⁷¹

¹⁷⁰ Nasser, *Britain and the Egyptian Nationalist Movement*, 122.

¹⁷¹ Badrawi, *Isma'il Sidqi*, 140.

His replacement, Egyptian Prime Minister Mahmud Fahmi al-Nokrashi, took a hard line approach to the British occupation. He immediately demanded the British negotiate with Egypt on a planned departure, but his all-or-nothing approach impeded any real progress.¹⁷² He stated that the Egyptian people were tired of being under the thumb of the British and according to Lord Killearn, he “kept harping on Egyptian national pride and injured feelings: nothing would satisfy him but removal of every British soldier from the country.”¹⁷³ Despite Killearn’s quick dismissal of the problem, Nokrashi’s sentiments were common throughout Egypt and played a big part in the inability of the British to successfully negotiate with Egypt over the next several years.

Between 1944 and 1949, the position of Egyptian Prime Minister changed hands six times.¹⁷⁴ It seemed as though no Prime Minister could appease the citizen’s of Egypt, their monarchy, or both. In February of 1946, after only about a year in office, Nokrashi was forced to resign from his position.¹⁷⁵ Not even a Prime Minister who openly criticized the British could appease the disgruntled masses. Any actions taken against the people of Egypt, such as Nokrashi’s attempts to quell riots earlier that month, were used

¹⁷² Botman, *Egypt from Independence to Revolution*, 47.

¹⁷³ Lord Killearn to Foreign Office, 1 September 1945, *Egypt and the Defence of the Middle East*, Part I, FO 371/45924, p. 38.

¹⁷⁴ Kent, ed., *Egypt and the Defence of the Middle East*, Part I, xxiv.

¹⁷⁵ PS Scrivener minute on British requirements in Egypt, 2 March 1946, FO 371/53286 NO 942.

Interestingly enough this change of Egyptian Prime Minister (PM) was at the same time Lord Killearn was replaced with Sir R. Campbell. Documentation indicates that this change occurred because Killearn was a supporter of Nahas, a potential PM. It was feared that Lord Killearn might attempt another forced installation of a British chosen PM, like had occurred in 1942. Policymakers did not want this to occur because of the strong presence of anti-British demonstrations within Egypt, and instructed Campbell to work with King Farouk as “the chief element of continuing stability and not to attempt to force Nahas into power.”

as fodder for a variety of competing Egyptian factions who found it easy to quickly tie the unpopular events to the problem of British occupation.¹⁷⁶

When Ismail Sidqi replaced Nokrashi as Prime Minister that same year, most of Egypt was in a state of severe disarray. Riots, strikes, and protests were all common occurrences along the Nile, with the removal of the British from Egyptian soil at the top of their list of grievances. The new Egyptian Prime Minister's response to the situation was to arrest anyone who opposed him such as "hundreds of journalists, intellectuals, political and labor leaders on trumped up charges of Communist activity ... of course, he used the word communist quite loosely, applying it to all of a liberal or radical bent who tended to criticize or wanted to alter the Egyptian status quo."¹⁷⁷ Additionally, organizations that supported any potential opponent to his administration, including the free press, were censored or shut down. For all intents and purposes, it looked as though the British had gained an ally; maybe even one who would resume talks and solve Britain's quickly deteriorating position within Egypt. The British, for their part, did little to help the poor relationship that was building between the new Prime Minister and the Egyptian people. On 21 February 1946, during a peaceful Egyptian demonstration, a British armored car attempted to break up the gathering and killed 23 people, and injuring a great many more.¹⁷⁸

When Sidqi went to London to discuss revisions to the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty, he was greeted with a great deal of enthusiasm. His determination to revise the

¹⁷⁶ Badrawi, *Isma'il Sidqi*, 140. Examples of these types of organizations were the Muslim Brotherhood, Young Egypt, and various small communist parties.

¹⁷⁷ Botman, *Egypt from Independence to Revolution*, 49.

¹⁷⁸ Badrawi, *Isma'il Sidqi*, 150.

treaty coupled with his qualifications as an “ideal negotiating partner” earned him a description as “... a political pragmatist, a devotee to the West, and a critic of extreme expressions of national sentiment.”¹⁷⁹ Sidqi was equally optimistic that British negotiators would prove receptive and was quoted describing the newly elected Labour Party in Britain as an indication of the “... new spirit prevailing throughout the world.”¹⁸⁰

When Sidqi was greeted in London, it was by Britain’s newly appointed Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin. Although Sidqi had expressed optimism based on a newly elected British government, in reality the policies of Churchill’s administration and Labour politics in Britain concerning foreign policy remained fairly consistent after the war. Britain’s position in the Middle East was still considered a top priority. What changed after the war was that the British government, particularly Ernest Bevin, was determined to not only plan the future of the region, but to take steps geared toward implementing a permanent solution to the problems surrounding occupation of Egypt. One of those steps was to resolve the matter of the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty, once and for all. The primary topic at hand for the Egyptians was immediate withdrawal of the British. For the British, it was to find a way to maintain their strategic requirements in the region. The role of Cyrenaica in all of this was bilateral—first as a bargaining chip to woo the Egyptians, and second as a potential alternative to Britain’s enormous investment in Egypt.

As an instrument of diplomatic negotiations with Egypt, the value of Cyrenaica was huge, with some even believing it eclipsed the regions strategic importance.

¹⁷⁹ Tignor, *Capitalism and Nationalism at the End of Empire*, 48.

¹⁸⁰ Royal Institute of International Affairs, Information Papers No 19, 83.

Throughout the war, the Egyptian government had repeatedly expressed the desire to incorporate all, or part, of the province into Egypt at the conclusion of the war. But this was not the only alternative they would consider. In 1945, it became clear that connecting the territory to the Middle East, in general, had become somewhat important in their planning. The Egyptian vision for the region was not limited to only direct annexation. In one of Bevin's memorandums he explains: "Egypt considered that a plebiscite should be held in Libya and would welcome any of the following solutions: a free and independent Libya which could become a member of the Arab League; incorporation into Egypt; or an International Trusteeship to be exercised by Egypt or the Arab League."¹⁸¹ Because Egypt was a central part of Middle East politics, and since Egypt's position in relation to other Arab countries had taken a patriarchal role, it was evident that the only solutions acceptable to them involved an administration in all or part of Libya that was submissive to Egypt.

While the British Labour government had other plans for the futures of Tripolitania and Fezzan, many of their strategies concerning the future of Cyrenaica were somewhat compatible in fulfilling these Egyptian requirements. For some time, they had struggled over who should govern Cyrenaica. One plan was to transform the BMA into a semi-permanent fixture, as a "British strategic base under the Security Council."¹⁸² Ernest Bevin at one point stated "I recommend ... that as our immediate aim we should concentrate on securing a British trusteeship for Cyrenaica, so drafted as to give us the necessary strategic facilities, and leading up to independence after ten years, with an

¹⁸¹ Bevin Memorandum, 18 April 1946, CAB 129/9.

¹⁸² Ibid.

extension if necessary by agreement with the United Nations.”¹⁸³ This plan, especially the idea of native rule under the guidance of the British, was a popular one. Nevertheless, it was also costly, required a long-term obligation, and it was highly unlikely to be accepted by the Egyptians. Subsequently, it went against the overall British foreign policy of reducing direct overseas commitments,¹⁸⁴ and it was unpopular both domestically in Britain and internationally. A more fashionable plan was indirect control of the region through the Egyptians. In this scenario, the natives, i.e. the Senussi, would govern the province directly and it would fall under the Egyptian government as a dependency. Of course, if this option was negotiated as a part of the revised Anglo-Egyptian agreement, it would be put under “Egyptian administration on condition that the military clauses in the Egyptian Treaty applied to Cyrenaica.”¹⁸⁵

“During the Bevin-Sidqi negotiations the British believed that another base or a series of smaller bases could be established in the Middle East”¹⁸⁶ to replace the platitude of installations that they had cultivated inside Egypt. Finding the correct location to replace Egypt, however, was not an easy task. When considering alternative locations, they had to look at “not merely barracks and landing grounds and the apparatus of G.H.Q., but storage and repair facilities of the kind available in Egypt; among their requirements were a good port, ample water supplies and a local labour corps.”¹⁸⁷ Cyrenaica had a great deal to recommend it for the job. “The Tobruk and Benghazi coasts were important as maritime bases ... moreover, air bases in this part of North

¹⁸³ Bevin Memorandum, 23 September 1946, CAB 129/13.

¹⁸⁴ Fitzsimons, *Foreign Policy of the British Labour Government*, 68.

¹⁸⁵ Bevin Memorandum, 18 April 1946, Cab 129/9.

¹⁸⁶ Tignor, *Capitalism and Nationalism at the End of Empire*, 49.

¹⁸⁷ Monroe, *Britain's Moment in the Middle East*, 157.

Africa could be a useful addition to the British defence and transport routes in the eastern Mediterranean.”¹⁸⁸

Although Cyrenaica was deliberated as a prospective location, it was also pointed out by some British planners that it lacked many key requirements to fully replace Egypt. Additionally, unlike the other regions considered, the war had maimed or destroyed many of Cyrenaica’s key assets. Most of the facilities built by the Italians had been wiped-out, and repairing or replacing them would be expensive. “Benghazi alone had suffered over 1,000 air raids.”¹⁸⁹ Some believed Palestine, Kenya, Cyprus, or the Sudan, either collectively or individually, might be better equipped to handle the heavy burden of replacing installations in Egypt. Still, the value of Cyrenaica often showed up in their plans as well. In 1947, when the possibility of stationing troops in Palestine was removed from the table, the Joint Planning Staff (JPS) created a priority list for redeployment that placed “Obtaining our long term strategic requirements in Cyrenaica” at the top; number two, three and four concerned Tripolitania, Sudan, and Cyprus respectively.¹⁹⁰ Historian Wm Roger Louis corroborates that although these other plans did exist “it was true that in 1946 Palestine could still be regarded as a fallback position from Egypt, but the main thrust of British strategic planning had been to distribute British troops and eventually to establish an alternative base in Cyrenaica.”¹⁹¹

British strategy continued to favor Cyrenaica by taking into account its attributes and worth during the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty negotiations. Just one month before Sidqi

¹⁸⁸ Gat, *Britain and Italy*, 121.

¹⁸⁹ Wright, *The Emergence of Libya*, 331.

¹⁹⁰ JPS to the Chiefs of Staff (COS), 4 November 1947, *Egypt and the Defence of the Middle East Part I*, 105 DEFE 6/4, p. 243.

¹⁹¹ Louis, *The British Empire in the Middle East*, 692.

flew to London, Ernest Bevin said “its geographical importance in relation to Imperial Defence needs no emphasis and the Chiefs of Staff have recently stressed the strategic importance of Cyrenaica as a result of the trend of negotiations for a revision of the Egyptian Treaty.”¹⁹² At the same time, Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, was equally convinced of the value of Cyrenaica, as well as other nations that surrounded Egypt, which he believed could assist in “safeguarding” Britain’s Middle East position as a hub for stationing troops during peacetime.¹⁹³

Unfortunately, the Bevin-Sidqi negotiations in the end came to naught. Although an understanding was reached, Sidqi Pasha was unable to sell the draft treaty to his homeland. The “draft evacuation protocol” which outlined a 3 year withdrawal plan, was especially disliked by the Egyptians who wanted an immediate departure of British troops. The Egyptian Prime Minister’s interest in pursuing an “Insular-Egypt” strategy, where outside forces were only allowed to occupy the region when the threat was directly related to Egyptian or neighboring Arab state was unpopular. He innocently thought this policy would “... convince the Egyptian public that their country would no longer function as the playing field of empires; that only when events obviously threatened Egyptian—not British—security would the bases be turned over to foreign forces.”¹⁹⁴ Unfortunately most Egyptians were interested in the “Arab-League Strategy” which proposed a “new” Middle East with “... a bloc of Arab states, completely independent of Western power.”¹⁹⁵ Cyrenaica was never formally addressed in the written agreement,

¹⁹² Bevin Memorandum, 23 September 1946, Cab 129/13.

¹⁹³ Rahman, *A British Defence Problem*, 101.

¹⁹⁴ Doran, *Pan-Arabism before Nasser*, 72-73.

¹⁹⁵ Doran, *Pan Arabism before Nasser*, 71.

although it is unlikely that its inclusion would have made a difference. Although the future of Cyrenaica was important to the Egyptians, it did not trump their determination to see the British depart, therefore, “ ... the Egyptians disavowed the agreement and Sidqi Pasha ... Egypt wanted evacuation without conditions; no prime minister could consent to a continuing British alliance and survive.”¹⁹⁶

After the failure of the Bevin-Sidqi Anglo-Egyptian Treaty negotiations, British feelings regarding Cyrenaica’s worth strategically did not diminish. The region had supporters, such as Sir O Sargeant, who espoused a concept similar to that of Montgomery where an “outer ring of Middle East countries around Egypt”¹⁹⁷ would play a supporting role for an irreplaceable Egypt. According to his assessment, Libya was a location with development potential for the stationing of troops in peacetime, then during war they could be transferred to Egypt:

... offensive air operations can be developed and our sea communications in the Eastern Mediterranean protected, it [Libya] is also virtually the only area from which land forces could enter Egypt immediately on the threat of war. It is chiefly for this reason that the Chiefs of Staff have pressed so strongly that we should obtain control of this territory by means of an agreement.¹⁹⁸

Libya, as a Mediterranean nation, also provided a staging ground for access on the underbelly of Europe, either during peacetime with commercial transport or strategically

¹⁹⁶ Monroe, *Britains Moment in the Middle East*, 156. Sidqi was replaced by Nukrashi as Prime Minister when he returned to Egypt.

¹⁹⁷ Lieutenant-General Sir L. Hollis to Sir O Sargeant, 11 March 1948, FO 371/69174. This Outer Ring theory was around Egypt. It was not the Outer Ring strategy that ran through Turkey to Iran and the Persian Gulf.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

during war. It was clear that the geographical position of Libya, like all the nations which surrounded the Mediterranean, was inherently valuable and would remain so indefinitely. Although the value of the region had only been uncovered during World War II, Libya, and Cyrenaica in particular, would remain a part of British strategy for many years to come.

That was not the case in the Fezzan, where British interest mimicked that of the Italians; it was absent. Not only was the region landlocked, but it was also sand-locked and mountain-locked from the other two provinces. Much of the terrain was ergs, with only a few oases and mountain areas that were inhabitable. Additionally, reaching the province was difficult. No water equaled no ports for shipping, and my research does not show any airfields. Travel by vehicle or camel was the only real option available. K. S. Sandford describes:

... modern mechanical transport, skillfully driven and well maintained can operate fairly freely over most of Libya, irrespective of roads, with exceptions which would include the following: the sand-burdened areas, where mechanized movement is in fact often possible but liable to be slow and fraught with difficulty; the broken highlands of the south-west and to some extent the volcanic uplands of the centre ...¹⁹⁹

Both of these regions flanked, or were part of the Fezzan, and Britain saw little advantage to pursuing ownership. Since the French had taken responsibility for the territory during the war, it was assumed that they would retain the region after the conflict and eventually absorb it into their African Empire.

¹⁹⁹Sandford, "Western Frontiers of Libya," 29-40.

At the same time, the British were working towards a plan to dispose of Tripolitania. To a lesser degree than Fezzan, Tripolitania was viewed as a dilemma that should be handed off to a reliable European ally. While the region had potential, the province never fit smoothly into British strategy. Yet because a plethora of nations were interested in acquiring the region, the British did not think they would have a problem discarding it.

At the front of the pack of potentials were the Italians. Not only would giving the province to Italy solve the British problem of disposal, but it was also the logical choice. Unlike in Cyrenaica, where the war had virtually cleared out Italian occupation, Tripolitania still held approximately 38,000 Italians at the end of the war. This was a strong motivator, in-and-of-itself, to return the province to Italy. Additionally, the British felt that “the administration and economy of this western territory [Tripolitania] depends largely on the Italians and would suffer under Arab rule.”²⁰⁰ There was also the desire to hasten democratic Italy’s postwar recovery, which was suffering severely, and to firmly implant them as a western ally and out of the clutches of the Soviet Union. The Cold War was now an additional consideration in planning. Although Italy was given aid at the end of the war, especially by the Americans, it was never at the levels needed to fully recuperate and her “economic plight” had only gotten worse over time.²⁰¹ Even as Italy became a republic in 1946, many feared the financial strain would either entice the weakened Italians toward communism, or that a fragile Italy would provide the Soviet Union an inlet to replace the de Gasperi government through either legal deposition or

²⁰⁰ Bevin Memorandum, 18 April 1946, CAB 129/9.

²⁰¹ Gat, *Britain and Italy*, 132.

revolution.²⁰² It was important to the British that Italy remain on their side, and giving back Tripolitania might assist in alleviating many of their problems and in keeping them in the western world's corner. Indeed, "if it were returned to Italy under certain positive guarantees as to de-militarisation and paramountcy of native interests, it would be quite safe for British interests."²⁰³

Equally balancing British desires to strengthen Italy's postwar position was their desire to do the right thing. One of the main problems that still haunted Italy, and which influenced Britain, was Italy's surplus population. At the conclusion of the war, it is estimated that the country was burdened with "some two million Italians which the domestic labour market could not absorb."²⁰⁴ Tripolitania provided an outlet for that population, even if it was at the expense of a native Arab population that was already being pushed inland to less desirable terrain. In 1949, Ernest Bevin admitted that his policies in regards to Libya "were out of line with his general 'pro-Arab' policy."²⁰⁵ Of course, the administration did make it clear that although the British were interested in accommodating the Italians and the Arabs, self-interest was at the forefront of their policy. Any assistance extended to either group would be at the benefit of Great Britain's goals.

That was the case when Italian demands for colonial restitution came at the end of the war. Italy believed that although their government had been Fascist, and an enemy at the beginning of the war, the regime that emerged from World War II was a different

²⁰² Gat, *Britain and Italy*, 134.

²⁰³ Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, 25 September 1945, CAB 129/2 Doc 39.

²⁰⁴ Pedaliu, *Britain, Italy and the Origins of the Cold War*, 72.

²⁰⁵ Louis, *Imperialism*, 506.

administration. As such, they should not be punished for the actions of their predecessor. Additionally, they should be given every opportunity to succeed and recognized for their role as an ally at the end of the war. British policy concurred with a great deal of this line of reasoning. Consequently, Ernest Bevin endorsed a proposal known as the Bevin-Sforza Plan to formally partitioned Libya into three constituent parts of Tripolitania, Fezzan, and Cyrenaica. British planning had always favored a divided Libya, and under this particular accord, each of the provinces would fall under the administration of a different imperial power; Italy, France, and Great Britain respectively.²⁰⁶ Not only would this plan bolster the Italian's position, but it also ensured rights to Cyrenaica for Great Britain. Although the idea also incorporated a "ten-year trusteeship," with independence for Libya at the end of the line, it was also a way to buy the British time. With enough time, they could reinforce their already strong relationship with the Senussi in Cyrenaica, the Italians could bolster Tripolitania, and the French could expand on an already promising rapport with the natives of Fezzan. History had taught ten years is a long time. For them, it was just enough to do all of these things.

Despite all of these plans put forth by the British, the future of Libya's provinces was determined by more than just British preferences. The World War II era also created a perfect storm of circumstances that brought international cooperation, or at least attempts at it, to the forefront of postwar planning and policy. The world was changing and the way nations interacted was changing as well. Indeed, twentieth century Libya had itself become a textbook manifestation of how nation-building was influenced by an

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 505.

expanding international role in policy, and how imperialism was evolving to adapt to those changes.

The story of the United Nations is an excellent example of another way the World War II era shifted Libya's future. It all began in 1942 with a proclamation of twenty-six countries called *The Declaration by the United Nations*. Created to describe exactly what the allies were fighting for in the war, it specifically addressed "freedom of speech and religion ... freedom from fear and want ... [and] pledged that the Allies sought no lands or other gains from the war."²⁰⁷ Furthermore, it "contained an affirmation of the right to popular self-determination which could be applied to the world outside of Europe."²⁰⁸ In 1945, it grew to organization status as the United Nations when "fifty countries had come to San Francisco ...[and] these men realized that civilization had barely survived a terrible crisis, ... some form of world organization had to be created if the different nations and races of mankind were not to endanger their very existence through more war."²⁰⁹ Plus, although imperialists had no intention of immediate withdraw from Africa, the establishment of the proclamation coupled with the creation of a new world organization, obligated nations who were unwilling, or who changed their minds, toward a new way of doing business. Of course, the United Nations was not the first such organization to take on such a challenge. After World War I, the League of Nations was created with similar ambitions, but ultimately failed. Still, the experiences of two violent wars, instead of just one, now influenced the mentality of those involved and international accord was made king.

²⁰⁷ Fehrenbach, *The United Nations in War and Peace*, 15

²⁰⁸ Freund, *The Making of Contemporary Africa*, 183.

²⁰⁹ Fehrenbach, *The United Nations in War and Peace*, 15.

The pledge made by the United Nations of “no lands or other gains” for individual nations of the alliance, played a central part in postwar negotiations concerning the future of Libya. If the ally’s were going to learn from the war, and if things were really going to change, then it was critical that they adhere to the promises they had made during the war. That did not, however, mean that they intended to dismiss national goals, only that the way they achieved them would be different. It also meant using diplomacy that considered the opinions of even more players.

During the midst of all of these negotiations sprung an interest by the two largest members of the Big Four toward Libya. Both the United States and the Soviet Union saw Libya as an opportunity to further their agendas. Even though American interest in the Middle East during the war had remained primarily commercial and ideological²¹⁰ that was not the case when it came to Libya. For the United States, policy toward that particular region was directed chiefly at strategic objectives. The United States shared a special relationship with Great Britain, and planning was often complementary or similar in regards to Libya. Where the two differed was in their province of choice; the United States was interested in Tripolitania, whereas Great Britain had always favored Cyrenaica. When the allies gained control of Libya in 1943, the United States quickly capitalized on some of Libya’s strategic attributes. For instance, they took over an airfield in the province of Tripolitania at Mellaha which had a runway capable of launching the largest bombers in the world to a wide variety of locations. They also

²¹⁰ Hahn, *United States, Great Britain, and Egypt*, 36.

invested heavily in its development, spending approximately one hundred million dollars on improvements.²¹¹

The British, for their part, encouraged these types of commitments. The importance of the Middle East in British planning after World War II was substantial, ranking only second to the United Kingdom itself.²¹² Unfortunately, the war had weakened Britain's ability to defend that key position properly, therefore, it was imperative to distribute responsibility of the region to entrusted allies. No ally was more important, or more reliable, than the United States. As a result, their opinion held a great deal of weight, especially for the British. As postwar negotiations developed, the extent of their role in determining the future of Libya became evident. But it was not exactly what the British had envisioned. The British quickly realized that although international relations had made vast strides over the course of the war, individual nations are always influenced the greatest by self-interest. In this particular case, the interests of the United States did not initially match up nicely with the goals of Great Britain.

At the Potsdam Conference in 1945, the Americans were open to several possibilities regarding the future of Libya, two of which were similar in context to those of Great Britain and involved the partitioning of the provinces.²¹³ Recommendations that did not fit into British strategy were a return of the entire colony to Italy, or placing the region under the United Nations, both in the form of trusteeships. The idea of such a solution under United Nation auspices was put forward to the Council of Foreign

²¹¹ Wright, "The Best Aircraft Carrier in Africa," 71.

²¹² Ovendale, *Britain, the United States, and the Transfer of Power*, 2.

²¹³ Sir Norman Brooks Memorandum as Secretary of the Cabinet, 15 September 1945, CAB 128/3. The US endorsed splintering the Province, allowing Britain rights within Cyrenaica.

Ministers (CFM), the part of the United Nations charged with resolving the matter. “Mr. Byrnes had proposed in the Council of Foreign Ministers arrangements as regards Libya under which that area would receive a promise of independence after a 10-year period of trusteeship under administrators appointed by the Trusteeship Council of the United Nations.”²¹⁴ The Americans grew to favor this collective plan of Mr. Byrnes over the others. Individual administrations in each of the provinces ran by multiple nations held the potential to disrupt American interests, especially if an adversary such as the Soviet Union gained some type of control. Plus, the idea of individual provinces managed by different imperialists was not popular internationally.²¹⁵ Ironically, this American preference seems to be at odds with policies concerning “American support for self-determination, for an ‘interdependent, democratic world,’ and for a ‘people’s peace.’”²¹⁶ When forming the United Nations, the United States stressed the importance of self-determination, and in many ways they held firm to that belief. Still, external forces such as the Soviet threat and international perception described above appear to have taken priority in this case. A single trusteeship benefitted American policy—therefore it was the plan of preference.

Of course, trusteeship had become the buzz word of the Potsdam Conference, with everyone talking about international trusteeships as if they were freedom in a can. “... In reality [the west] had old-fashioned, big-power mandates in mind.”²¹⁷ The world

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Bills, *The Libyan Arena*, 42.

²¹⁷ Bruce St John, *Libya: From Colony to Independence*, 90.

had made enormous strides in removing new-imperialism²¹⁸ from popular thinking, but imperialism in a contemporary and abstract form had taken its place. No longer did powerful nations seek to expand literally, or territorially; now it was more important to gain influence with limited responsibility. A trusteeship was seen as a way to control a region without a long-term commitment. It also cost less than traditional colonialism and it was seen as a progressive policy that would eventually produce less global friction. In essence, why not conduct business that benefits you in other nations, but that you are not responsible for maintaining. Extract what you want, but leave the burdens of government to someone else.

Interestingly enough, the British preference for individually administered provinces was reduced due to the influence of the United States. In 1946 Ernest Bevin wrote that the Cabinet had decided to support the American's plan for Libya. This was in the best interest of Great Britain because of internal British public opinion, the removal of the "embarrassing Russian request" of sole trusteeship over Tripolitania, and the importance of getting the United States involved in sharing the responsibility for the Middle East " ... while public opinion in the United States was in the mood."²¹⁹

The "embarrassing Russian request" mentioned above leads to yet another nation interested in Libya. The province of Tripolitania was particularly important to them. The Soviet Union expressed their interest in Libya early in postwar discussions, first at the San Francisco Conference in June 1945, and later at the Potsdam Conference in July.²²⁰ Two overarching proposals dominated their agenda: give the Soviet Union trusteeship of

²¹⁸ Commonly regarded as the nineteenth century until the First World War.

²¹⁹ Bevin Memorandum, 18 April 1946, CAB 129/9.

²²⁰ Rahman, *A British Defence Problem*, 39.

Tripolitania or give it to the Italians. In their bid to gain control of Tripolitania for themselves, speculation at the time states “ ... it [the Soviet Union] wants to use the territory as a base for propaganda operations inside the Moslem world,”²²¹ and that it was a part of a race to establish allies in the Middle East. The Soviets, however, had equally expressed ambitions to establish themselves in Africa. In a meeting during the fall of 1945, Soviet Foreign Secretary Molotov was prompt to question the American plan of a single trusteeship and put forth an argument for individual trusteeships of the three provinces, each overseen by an Allied nation. In his opinion, the Soviets should be given Tripolitania for two reasons:

Russia had suffered greatly at the hand of Italian troops fighting in the side of the Germans, and secondly, the Soviet[s] had wide experience in establishing friendly relations between different nationalities which they could turn to advantage in one of the Italian colonies, in which they would undertake to use the authority given them by the United Nations in such a way as not merely to maintain but enhance the prestige of the United Nations.²²²

The other option acceptable to the Soviets was to return Tripolitania to the Italians, but this only developed in 1946 in response to a proposal made by Ernest Bevin that spring who said “I proposed in the Council of Foreign Ministers that the whole of Libya should be given independence. This was unacceptable to the other delegations, but in the course

²²¹ Wechsberg, “Letter from Libya” in *New Yorker*, 1951.

²²² Sir Norman Brooks Memorandum as Secretary of the Cabinet, 15 September 1945, CAB 128/3.

of subsequent discussions, the Soviets withdrew its claims to Tripolitania and gave support to the French proposal that all the Italian colonies should be returned to Italy.”²²³ This change of heart, on the surface, appears to be in direct opposition with earlier claims by Molotov that Italy should be punished for fighting on the side of the Germans and that Russia suffered greatly at the hands of the Italians. In reality, however, it is simply an example of how Soviet policy, just like the other powers, was changing and adapting to fit the new international way of doing business. If the Soviets could not convince other powers to support their bid for Tripolitania directly,²²⁴ then perhaps by supporting Italy’s agenda they could gain an Italian ally, ultimately strengthening their European position and encouraging Italian communism.

Regardless of all the posturing that occurred during this time, it became clear in 1947 that international negotiations had bogged down. This was most evident at the Treaty of Paris, that same year, which was meant to resolve the matter of Italian colony disposition. Although the Italians formally relinquished their colonial territory at that meeting, “the failure of the allies to reach an agreement, either in open debate or in their more intimate conferences, made necessary a stop-gap agreement giving time for further thought.”²²⁵ Even a Commission of Investigation that had been sent to the provinces to gain local perspective came back with little to directly offer. Though they had spent the

²²³ Bevin Memorandum, 23 September 1946, CAB 129/13.

²²⁴ Some have argued that the Soviets never thought their appeal for Tripolitania would be taken seriously, and that the request was simply a bargaining chip to gain other concessions. While Libya held value as such, it is also reasonable to assume that the Soviet’s thought they stood a chance at acquiring Libya. Early in the war, the British set a precedent by caving on Soviet territorial demands. At the end of the war, the Russians had every reason to believe that this precedent might continue. For more on the relationship between the Soviet Union and Great Britain during the war, see *Between Churchill and Stalin: The Soviet Union, Great Britain, and the Origins of the Grand Alliance* by Steven Miner.

²²⁵ Majeed, “Libya: A Geopolitical Study,” 71 .

last couple of years devising ways to determine Libya's fate, and although "the four powers had agreed on a list of nineteen other interested governments," they still had no resolution on the future of the territory.²²⁶

Nations continued to make proposals and debate until 1949, when out of the blue the dynamics of the negotiations made an unexpected turn toward a united and independent Libya. This change was primarily the result of the matter being moved up within the United Nations structure, to the General Assembly, and the failure of the Bevin-Sfora Plan. When the "Bevin-Sfora plan failed by one vote to gain the necessary two-thirds majority for its adoption in the UNGA[United Nations General Assembly] and the plan was dropped," those who supported it became discouraged and realized they had to find another way. If a divided Libya was unacceptable, then that only left a united one.

Most nations by this time either favored the idea of an independent and united Libya, or were easily persuaded by the larger powers to accept it. For the principal players, such as the Americans and the British, strategic requirements were still a factor. To the Americans, Tripolitania was still an important aspect of their strategy, but since they had almost always pursued a policy of an independent single-state, the United Nation decree was an obvious win for them. By this time, British policy had shifted enough to accept the new idea of Libya, but their position regarding the value of the region remained steadfast. In a 1949 British JPS report, Libya was listed as the sixth most important country in the Middle East with particular emphasis placed on the strategic value of Cyrenaica where " ... the right to develop the ports, airfields, communications and public utilities [and] the right to locate armed forces in the country

²²⁶ Bills, *The Libyan Arena*, 133.

in peace time,”²²⁷ was still a primary objective. Any lingering misgivings by either the British or the Americans, however, were quickly dismissed when it was realized that a united and independent Libya fit into their strategies better than separate trusteeships.

Henry S. Villard, the first United States Ambassador to Libya explained:

It may be worth noting that if Libya had passed under any form of United Nations trusteeship, it would have been impossible for the territory to play a part in the defense arrangements of the free world. Under the United Nations trusteeship system, the administrator of a territory cannot establish military bases.²²⁸

For these reasons, the resolution that established Libya as an independent nation was signed on 21 November 1949 “... with a vote of forty nine to none, with nine abstentions.”²²⁹ It came as no surprise that the Soviets were one of the abstentions. The accords did not give them any advantage, especially since the natives that would ultimately gain control, the Senussi, were seen as allies of the British. Additionally, the French were displeased over their loss of Fezzan and also declined to vote. The other members of the Big Four, the United States and Great Britain, however, were anxious to press forward. For the British, the outcome provided all of the benefits with very little cost. In a 1950 meeting in Tripoli, a quick vote put the Senussi in charge of the country. As an ally, the British had little trouble negotiating contracts to station troops in Cyrenaica. For the Americans it was equally beneficial since they could now maintain Wheelus Air Force Base “ ... as the essential western anchor in an arc of strategic bases

²²⁷ JPS to the COS, 11 July 1949, *Egypt and the Defence of the Middle East* Part I, DEFE 4/23, p. 342-43.

²²⁸ Wright, “The Best Aircraft Carrier in Africa,” 75.

²²⁹ Louis, *Imperialism*, 517.

stretching from Libya to Saudi Arabia.²³⁰ The region gained even more attention from the United States in 1950, when General Eisenhower devised air strategy based on medium range bombers that would do the majority of missions for the Korean War. This strategy required air bases to be positioned in “favourable spots,” and “the United States instituted a crash programme for securing rights to develop new air bases; from Canada (Newfoundland and Labrador); from the UK (Libya); from France (Casablanca in Morocco—1951); and in Spain (1954); and from Turkey (Aadan).”²³¹ Not only did interest in Libya as a strategic asset not fall with independence, it was adapting and even rising to the occasion.

Even the Egyptians were satisfied with the decision. Although they did not annex the region directly, the United Nations created another Arab state—hopefully one that would fall under the guidance of Egypt and the newly created Arab League. Additionally, the establishment of Libya provided strategic benefits for them, i.e. a buffer Arab state between Egypt and the west. Most importantly, a Libya under the Senussi provided a potential alternate location for western nations to shift operations out of Egypt.

While it had been a long road to this point, the battle for control of Libya was over. While the natives had technically won freedom from imperialist occupation, it was clear that their future was determined by external forces. The creation of Libya was driven by great power self-interest, not necessarily native self-determination. Although some attempts were made to confer with the natives, such as the Commission of

²³⁰ Bruce St John, *Libya: From Colony to Independence*, 106.

²³¹ Cohen, “*Fighting World War Three*,” 18.

Investigation that was sent to question Libyans in 1946-1947, its value was minimal in determining the fate of the region. International competition and strategic ambitions for the strongest external forces was much more influential in Libya's outcome. After years of debate, the great powers under the umbrella of the United Nations created a Libya that worked best for them. Although it was impossible for one external nation to accomplish this task, due to changing global attitudes, the United Nations provided an acceptable solution, but for who? Western nations were still present in the form of base contracts that favored the British and Americans, Italian citizens still refused to leave in Tripolitania, and a superimposed government ruled over the majority of natives, who had no say in any of these matters.

CONCLUSIONS

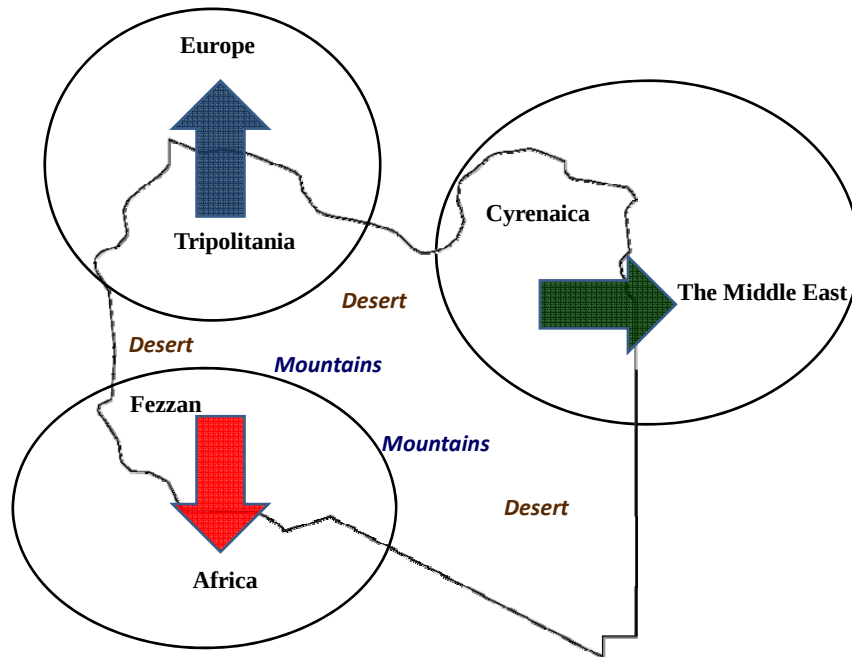
Before World War II, the only major power interested in Libya was Italy, but their stay in Libya was never an easy one. Over the course of their occupation, the Italians spent the first two-thirds of their time struggling with native rebellions from a populace who were unwilling to accept subjugation under Italian rule. While the cost versus benefit ratio can be argued, what is clear is that the Italians were determined to stay in Libya, and the natives of the region were not willing to fall to a European power easily. The last third of the Italian era in Libya was slightly more successful. With brief periods of mass immigration, the newly appointed governor, Italo Balbo, made huge strides in the 1930s conquering the area through demographic colonization. It was during this time that the provinces were at their most vulnerable, and when a European nation stood the best chance of annexing the territory permanently. But these strides in subduing the region, by overwhelming it with immigrants and creating loyal native citizens, were short lived. All of Balbo's advances were quickly made irrelevant with the introduction of war.

World War II followed and transformed an often forgotten land into one that clearly demanded attention. Like the Scramble for Africa a half-of-a-century earlier, the conflict introduced Libya's potential to the world as a spoil of war. The value of the three provinces that made up the territory, especially individually, were put on display as a battle raged in her seas, on her shores, and in the air above her. These years of fighting were also a time of dreaming for scores of nations who imagined securing a part of Libya for themselves. Even before the British gained control of the two northern provinces of

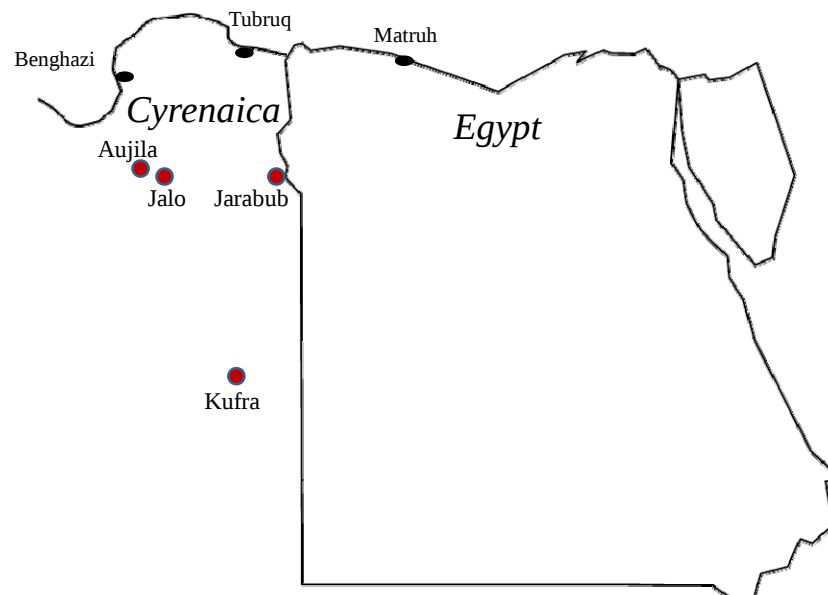
Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, and the French invaded Fezzan, nations were posturing to chip away their own piece of the pie. At the conclusion of World War II, the possibilities for a divided Libya seemed endless.

After the war, the desire to claim Libya intensified even further. For several years the Big Four and external powers, such as Egypt, continued to plan strategies that benefitted themselves more than the natives who inhabited Libya. Most often, their plans concentrated on partitioning the provinces, but over time the idea of a single independent Libya took hold. But, who did an independent and united Libya benefit? On the surface, it looked like the concept of self-determination and native interest drove policy, but in reality that was not the case. Imperialism had survived the war intact: in fact it was thriving in a new and complex world. Although the welfare of the natives was considered by outside powers, external strategic and diplomatic ambitions, especially in Europe and the Middle East, shaped Libya's future—with the journey from Italian colony to independence a tale of international competition. As many nations came forward to claim Libya, it became obvious that the region's future would not be settled easily. An individual external power could no longer do the job, and it had never been an option for the natives to determine their own fate. The future of Libya became an international question, which was settled by fusing the provinces into a single state that presumably shared a single identity, but in reality shared only the commonality of imperialism.

Maps



Map 1. Libya and the Conflicting Global Pull.



Map 2. Inland Oases Granted to Sidi Idris.

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